MUSIC:

What Happened?

Scott Miller
With a foreword by Bob Lloyd

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Reviews of **Music: What Happened?**

Four stars from *Rolling Stone Magazine*! "Scott Miller was the cerebral indie-pop auteur behind the band Game Theory, whose classic 1987 album Lolita Nation is a head-spinning classic. But he puts a lifetime of musical smarts into this book. The premise is simple: Miller breaks down songs from every year since 1957, more than 1,000 in all. But his insights are dazzling. When he digs into details that make a song work, he'll make you want to hear 'Hey, Jude' right now—and make you feel like you're hearing it for the first time."

—Rob Sheffield, *Rolling Stone*

"This is a new and lively style of music writing that you just keep wanting to read more of."

—Aimee Mann

"In capsule reviews of half-forgotten pop records, Scott Miller manages actual humor (a first in music criticism) and major insights that may change the way you think about, for example, 1967. Almost a new art form."

—Stephin Merritt

"The way he describes the songs he loves—some very indie, some anything but—is tremendously suggestive. If only he or some acolyte could spin a worldview around those observations we might really have something to go on."

—Robert Christgau, Dean of American Rock Critics

Music: What Happened?

by Scott Miller

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Readers are welcome to send comments and corrections to mwh@125records.com.

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Dedication

After my daughters Valerie and Julianne came along, my wife Kristine must have noticed that the passions and opinions from my musical past were now without a good home, so she encouraged me to find a channel to express them, if only to make the thoughts available to the girls for posterity. This project is dedicated with much love to the three of them.

Acknowledgements

Sue Trowbridge and Joe Mallon have gone to a lot of trouble to give me the only opportunity in the last ten years to release new music, and to share thoughts with an audience on the 125 Records web site, and now in print. Their generosity and creativity, as well as the example of their year-end CD collections, made it possible for me to write an organized, book-length set of thoughts about songs.

Besides writing the foreword, Bob Lloyd continuously shaped the project's content and lent invaluable expertise proofreading and helping me understand publishing production issues.

Jeffrey Norman contributed significantly; he caught quite a few historical inaccuracies I was about to commit, and made some wise recommendations that raised the level of polish in many places.

Betsy Lescosky's cover artwork, using my wife Kristine's photos of me in rock star poses I had no right to expect would be all that amusing, came out so unexpectedly well that I have to thank them both for that wizardry.

When I was growing up, public schools taught the basics of music theory. We sat on the floor and sang, "ta ta tee-tee ta" to learn quarter and eighth notes, unaware that an education in those basics was a vanishing privilege.

In the early 1970s, KROY, Sacramento's premier AM radio station, used to print and distribute little weekly most-played-music surveys. I now realize how moved I was by the offer to the pop sensibilities of the community an easy rapport with those of the DJs, and I can see this project as one of my several attempts to keep that custom going.

Mary and Dr. George Becker's brilliant record collection was the horizon beyond KROY; I still remember Mary convincing me to give Pet Sounds a more careful listen than would be expected from a 13-year-old in 1973.

I'm extremely grateful to my parents, Vaughn and Beth Miller, for a childhood with music—my mom's piano, my dad's hi-fi system, and their tolerance of my practicing, for years, in my bedroom with a full rock band making music I doubt they could have been able to tell from Half Japanese.

S.M.

Introduction

So, as we famously know from Nick Hornby's (or John Cusack's) *High Fidelity*, some people like to make ranked lists. And of course music is one of the great subjects for this predilection. The advent of cassette recorders and blank tapes in the mid-sixties meant that the industrious could begin to make their own mix tapes. Yet who knew back then, especially with the ascendancy of LPs and AOR radio, that eventually we'd all be endlessly encouraged to make and carry about our own personal playlists? These days even Bob Dylan sometimes must have to host his own radio show.

Scott Miller, who was born in nineteen and sixty—just two years before Dylan's recording of "Man of Constant Sorrow" marked Bob's first appearance on a Miller list—grew up in Sacramento, California. Miller's father recorded his son singing the theme from the TV show *Have Gun—Will Travel* when Scott was four years old. Soon Miller was making up his own songs to sing. By age nine, he was taking folk and classical guitar lessons from a man named Tiny Moore, who had played with Bob Wills. By 1971, Miller had switched to rock, and he was in his first band just a year later. Throughout his childhood, he had been interested in anything having to do with recording, and when he turned fifteen he finally got the TEAC four-track machine he'd been coveting. Like many others his age, Scott Miller loved the Beatles, the space program, and those shows that counted down to the number one song for the week. He started making his own countdown lists when he was twelve.

Many people find that the music they listened to during a formative period in their lives has become their music, and they no longer feel the urge to keep up with what's new, year in and year out. Miller, too, went on to college, got jobs in the non-music world, got married, started a family—but somehow he never stopped finding ways to play, and listen to, and talk about music. Many of his fans know him through his songs: he's had two major bands—Game Theory in the eighties and The Loud Family in the nineties—and he's put out more than a dozen albums. But what has been remarkable throughout his music career is how approachable he's been—through his many interviews, his availability before and after shows, his personal responses to letters and emails, attendance at fans' weddings (even once as the officiant), and, in the 2000s, his long-running "Ask Scott" column on the Loud Family website.

Scott Miller has always been a great interview subject because of the wide range of his interests and his sharp wit, but here we can see as well what an entertaining and brilliant writer he is. Practically every entry contains an inventive turn of phrase, an interesting revelation, or a pithy truth. Reading these entries is a delightful experience, not only because it's arguably an ideal popular music education, but also because it's akin to having a long, fabulous conversation with an ideal

fellow music fan. Miller is knowledgeable, insightful, full of thoughtful opinions, but also enthusiastic, sensitive, and funny as hell. It's as if he's invited you over to play and talk about your favorite records and discover a bunch of cool ones you'd never heard. You put this book down feeling enlightened and revved up about the experience of music again.

So, how did this all come about? Sometime after the release of the Loud Family and Anton Barbeau album *What If It Works?* in 2006, Miller began to stay up after putting his daughters to bed to make CDs from the annual lists he'd maintained since his youth. As someone who never hesitates to set the bar a little higher, he conceived of using this CD-making project as a springboard to an even more ambitious idea, one that could connect with a like-minded audience. He approached Sue Trowbridge and Joe Mallon, his longtime friends and supporters through the Loud Family website and 125 Records—the company Sue and Joe founded from Joe's winnings on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*—to suggest he replace "Ask Scott" with a project to write about each of the last 50 years in popular music, via countdown song lists, and to do it in response to fan requests. They readily agreed. He called the new blog "Music: What Happened?" and published the first list (for 1966) on the website on May 26, 2008. Over the course of the next 16 months, he responded to requests for all 50 years, ranging from 1957 to 2006. The publication of this book draws the 50 blog entries together (plus three bonus years: 2007, 2008, and 2009) in a single, remarkable volume.

The beauty of *Music: What Happened?* is that it blends the perspectives of a serious musician, a thoughtful critic, and an all-devouring music fan. Miller not only tells you why he loves particular songs, but also what was going on in the musical world in which they competed to be heard. He points out overall trends, from tendencies in lyrics to the use of certain instruments and treatments; he talks about individual decisions made, by real people—songwriters, singers, players, producers, engineers—that make certain songs stand out; but possibly best of all, he steps forward as a volunteer, with few constraints and very few axes to grind. His motive is primarily to share the joy of the music and try to get at some of the mysteries that make it so vital. He only talks about songs that personally grabbed him for one reason or another: it's not a job in which he's under pressure to produce a bell curve. Though he contextualizes and informs, and throws in sardonic asides, his great gift to the reader is his often uncanny ability to tease out what it is about a song that makes that light bulb go on: "Oh yeah, I *love* that part!"

But, as Marty DiBergi says, enough of my yakkin'. Reading through these years, whether you go in order or jump around to the ones that are especially meaningful to you personally, you can piece together the criteria behind Miller's choices. Yet it might be helpful to get some basic questions answered right off the bat, and what better source for answers than Scott Miller himself?

Bob Lloyd: How did you arrive at the title for the project? Does it imply that you feel popular music has taken some wrong turns?
Scott Miller: As much as I love it, I do think there have been some horrendous wrong turns. Popular music always has to be someone's idea of a wrong turn. There's serious music over there, and it's been through proper training and durability testing, and then there's this lower music over here, the fad music that kids will drop next year. If you want to do what I do and debate pop that's worthy and lasting versus pop that isn't, you're defined out of existence right away unless you decide on a specialty definition of "popular," and my definition is that the goal of good pop is not more popularity, period, but broader appeal to a more diverse albeit potentially smaller cross-section of the population. A pop move to me is breaking the rule of some musical inner circle to reach a wider circle, in order to share feelings on an innovative level of humanity. Pop has been used as a bad word meaning not classical enough and a bad word meaning not punk enough. Sometimes it deserves it. Sometimes I'm the serious music fan moaning about the masses going for the cheap flash. As you know, I kid the 1980s. I wonder can it possibly be fair to condemn an entire decade as a horrifying decline in every kind of musical competency, but nostalgia for the eighties baffles me. Eighties nostalgia has lowered my opinion of nostalgia. So you're right, I was unconsciously targeting that kind of decline with "What Happened?" But pop music is great in that a true decline fosters a true pop response, like R.E.M. Eighties music suffered from a coliseum spectacle mentality, and R.E.M. reached around that with a sort of small-combo, home-spun literary connection approach.

BL: What constraints did you impose on yourself with regard to number of songs and running time, and why?
SM: The material had to fit on a single CD with a good playing order, and feel like a satisfying time capsule of the period and how I related to it. By "time capsule," I mean I have in mind an audience like my children, so it's not just cool stuff you haven't heard, there's a preservation society agenda in there. I also think it makes for a more interesting claim about the quality of obscure material to commit to the relative quality of well-known material. I didn't repeat artists except for a few cases of irresistible temptation, and with a few exceptions, it's a countdown—best song of the year last, although toward the beginning, the order is the way it is for psychological effect, not for, say, the first song being strictly the 21st best song of the year and the second being the 20th.

BL: Are the lists faithful to what you originally chose, or have they changed a lot over time? How did you handle songs you didn't know about at the time, but discovered later?
SM: Oh, the lists are recent selections with new rules—it's not like I dug out a list I made as a preteen for the 1972 CD. But where I'm aware of what I used to like, which is the case most of my life, I force myself not to disown my ears of that period out of embarrassment. Your ears are always right, the embarrassment is always wrong. A

five-year-old can identify good music far more infallibly than a fifteen-year-old, because the fifteen-year-old is listening almost exclusively for what his or her friends would be likely to approve of. The older I get, the more I admire rock critics' ability to take a public stand on music.

BL: How did you handle writing about the years before you were old enough to experience them directly?
SM: I did a fair amount of researching what was in people's heads at the time, especially in the area of jazz. Friends have been making me jazz CDs and telling me some of the key stories for a number of years, and now with the Internet, Wikipedia, and iTunes, there's been an opportunity to do a little more immersion study. My dad is a serious record collector and audiophile, and I connected with him, especially on a couple of subjects like soundtrack material and obscure early sixties folk.

BL: Did you set yourself some general guidelines for how you wanted to write about music?
SM: The guidelines spilled out like pent-up libido. I've always run into music writing from the angle of one of the artists being judged, and I finally had an opportunity to react by counterexample. Probably the number one issue is that I like to hear a critic credit an artist with getting a feeling across. Even someone like Lester Bangs, who was a ball of emotion at all times, never really related to his favorite artists as people who develop a skill of conveying feelings. You don't feel that he comfortably acknowledged being moved as a result of their honest work. Artists in his writing were vaguely ridiculous, fascinating primitives, embodying an archetype by accident of nature. Part of the problem is that a lot of vital pop music is made by 22-year-olds who enjoy shock value, and it's pathetic when their elders are cornered into unalloyed reverence. But there are sensible ways for critics to navigate that. It's important to always be ready to give young artists credit for terrific music without being intimidated into a frame of mind where dark subject matter always gets a passing grade. There's such a thing as calling a 22-year-old a musical genius and in the same breath declaring that his or her lyrics are morally objectionable.

There needs to be more music talk in music criticism. Critics hardly ever identify catchy melodies as specific passages within a song. Is that because they don't matter? I try to be a window into the kind of talk bands themselves use, because bands will expend exactly as much mental energy as it takes to get to the point, and not one calorie more. Bands won't in a million years write sheet music, but they'll talk about the A-minor in the second measure of the chorus, because if they don't, they'll be lost. There's a lesson there. I expect readers of rock journalism to like and even demand *some* musical references like that, in sensitively modest doses to be sure, but enough to sketch the details of a commitment that great melody writing occurred or it didn't. I think the way critics go about trying to be readers' friends is by acknowledging and respecting readers' stylistic boundaries and keeping their own sentimentality in check, but readers actually want a

critic to be their friend by listening *through* stylistic boundaries with special gold-seeking ears, and reporting how they unexpectedly turned into a love-struck adolescent over a vocal harmony or a piano run, in circumstances that make no demographic sense, and the only words of value are that whatever it was happened on that A-minor in the second measure of the chorus. That's another sense of "Music: What Happened"—digging the truth of musical experience out from under half-asleep habits of discussing it.

I can't seem to stop myself from cluttering these things up with a certain amount of biographical detail, but, really, how worthless is that in the era of Wikipedia? Doing general background was respectable when pro writers traveled to endless clubs and record stores and archives years ago, but it feels like pointless fudging that's too easy when I do it. I'm not selling my value as an authority; I'm selling my ability to honestly disclose my real perspective. Staying honest is hard mental work, and part of that work is taking an inventory of the unspoken human relationships behind the experience of music. I'll talk about how I discovered certain music, about the person who made me some key mix tape I listened to for a year. I'll talk about how I knew, worked with, idolized, was jealous of, or just maintained an interesting false impression of certain recording artists. I'll go into studio geek mode once in a while, because the cult of audio tech among people who make albums is so deep and pervasive and quasi-religious it seems dishonest to talk for very long about recorded music without *any* mention of compressors, analog response, Neumann M49s, or the smell of heated-up studio wiring, or napalm in the morning, or whatever it is. I try to resist habits where I have something in mind but I don't talk about that because it's wrong for my audience. Reality is right for my audience.

BL: Did you already have all the songs? If not, what percentage did you have to go out and find?
SM: I had about three-quarters of them. Quite a few I pulled from vinyl, which means I got to play mastering engineer to get them loud enough to coexist with CDs, which invited all sorts of poetic license. I discovered a number of cases where the original vinyl master contains absolute magic and the CD doesn't, at least the first CD release, which plenty of the time was a tragically unworthy exercise. Todd Rundgren's "Couldn't I Just Tell You" in the original vinyl is blistering, and the digital is pretty doughy even as late as the 2009 iTunes version I downloaded for comparison.

BL: How do you see people actually being able to listen to the songs you're talking about?
SM: Probably a lot of iTunes. It would be great if I could make my actual copies available on iTunes, including edits and rips from vinyl, and someone like BMI would take care of the money going to the right people. That would be my dream, now that I think about it, if there were a business mechanism where I actually wielded the power to influence thousands of people to assemble the collections, and in doing so funnel a bunch of income to artists I care about. If I can

convert a thousand new people to Chris Stamey, there is absolutely no chance my life will have been in vain.

1957

"Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On" Jerry Lee Lewis
I began this survey choosing 1957 as the first of the bygone 50 years; it happens to be at about the middle of the explosion of rock and roll, the style of music I've worked in. By the time I took that music up just after classical guitar—after Dylan's having embraced rock and roll in 1965 and after Miles Davis's having reached detente with rock in 1970 with *Bitches Brew*—rock and roll would have become the serious music most people below age 35 made; but in 1957, most serious music listeners considered rock and roll something for teenagers—lowbrow teenagers, at that. Jerry Lee here illustrates the appeal and the threat. A young girl who's apparently never done this before is invited to a party in a barn; there is shaking, and Jerry gives her the personal instruction she needs on how to stand in place and shake things the way the Killer requires. Had this rendezvous with the long-haired piano-pounding wild man been with a daughter of mine, I wonder if I'd be off to as promising a start with the rock, but that's not what happened, and as John Lennon would say, thank you, Killer, for teaching me how to rock and roll.

"Hey! Bo-Diddley" Bo Diddley
Bo Diddley's pulverizing late-1955 appearance on the Ed Sullivan show must have been teased out into this variation for a 1957 single (with the also great B-side "Mona"), convolving the earlier "Bo Diddley" with "Old MacDonald Had a Farm": women here, women there. Speaking of which, those backing vocalists on *Sullivan* with the evening dresses, one with the guitar with the white coiled cable, were a knockout. That little gradually advancing step they did for the second half—a second half Ed apparently didn't authorize—reinforced the confrontation element coming from Bo up there staring the whole place down.

"You Send Me" Sam Cooke
One of 1957's differences from today is the phenomenon of singers who were so good they carried the proceedings on their own terms. "You Send Me" isn't breaking a sweat as a composition, but when it allows Sam a chance to zoom up to those high "woahs," it surprises you in a way someone isn't surprised by, oh, Christina Aguilera. Four words into a song of hers, you know Christina's is a much more brute force approach—every syllable hard at work transmitting signifiers of soulfulness and *realness.* Sam is just transmitting singing. Then, yikes, at some odd moment you realize how much he's got in reserve. Christina isn't just singing, she's executing a mental floor exercise, wonderful news for today's advanced world; we now know that what people really want from a singer is his participation in an amateur-status competition in agreed-upon technique.

“Embraceable You” Chet Baker
The guy is good; forever branded “West Coast jazz,” in Mr. Baker—someone with whom I feel one of those sheer geographical affinities, knocking around the Western Addition or Milpitas—the term was usually manifest as genuinely cool, rather than crossing to the dreaded “laid back.”

“I Put a Spell on You” Screamin’ Jay Hawkins
This has to be a pioneering event in the Dr. Demento universe—the AM radio DJ, monster movie version of the sixties—and its influence can still be found on as late an act as Marilyn Manson. You can hear the influence in serious somber artists like Jim Morrison, too; Screamin’ Jay is not just a novelty act. He is, as Eva from “Stranger Than Paradise” reminds us, a wild man, so bug off.

“Young Man’s Blues” Mose Allison
Mose’s clever and literate blues-speak has many deeply committed fans, including the Who, who honored this under-two-minute haiku as the leadoff track from *Live at Leeds.* This young man’s lament, that in “the old days” a young man at least had physical intimidation on his side, is a little more obviously wry humor here than when Mr. Daltrey explains how all the people would step BACK.

“Blues for Pablo” Miles Davis
Even in the Gil Evans–orchestrated era, Miles seemed like an intense cat. I’m guessing the title might refer to Pablo Picasso, but that may just say something about my own perceptions, in which there’s a common ground in the revolutionary approaches of jazz and cubism. The twentieth century was powerful where it was explosive and incendiary; when we try to remember how to admire the flames, we have the ashes in front of us.

“Just Because” Lloyd Price
I also love John Lennon’s version of this on *Rock and Roll,* his 1975 album made primarily to appease the publishers of Chuck Berry’s “You Can’t Catch Me,” which contained the lines Lennon closely paraphrased as “Here come old flat-top, he come grooving up slowly.” The very talented Lloyd Price’s version has plenty of its own advantages, especially little inflections; Lennon sidesteps the challenge to capture “Just because you think you so smart.”

“Shenandoah” Harry Belafonte
A strong candidate for the best-sounding pop singer of the era, Harry Belafonte will also go down in history as one of its key humanitarian activists. His rendition of the beautiful “Shenandoah” is monumental, but I actually dream of an editing project where I shorten the drawing out of every single word so you get something that almost follows meter.

"Keep A-Knockin'" Little Richard
The crazed, perfect resolution of "You keep a-knockin' but you can't come in/Come back tomorrow night and try it again" is the climax of one of my favorite Little Richard cuts, the first of the next round of songs after *Here's Little Richard.* I couldn't follow the drum intro to Led Zeppelin's "Rock and Roll" until I paid attention to this.

"Tammy" Debbie Reynolds
As a child, I considered this an enchanting melody, but upon entering adolescence it became a signifier of sentimental horribleness. Adolescence had a point; Debbie Reynolds is simply the wrong music-business pro for this assignment. While I respect what Livingston and Evans are doing with hyper-alliterative lines like "the old hooty owl hooty-hoos to the dove"—if you slur the words just right, it sounds like declension of some mysterious Germanic language—"olhudi aulhudi"—the last thing my ear wants is militant enunciation fighting off that pattern recognition in favor of perfect Lady the Cocker Spaniel understandability. Realizing I'm a bit of a chump, I do still love it; a line like "I'd sing like a violin if I were in his arms" knows what it's talking about.

"Bony Moronie" Larry Williams
Even in the midst of some of the hottest Elvis and Little Richard material, this rocks like nobody's business. The guitar and sax play together to achieve a fat, fuzzed-out sound not unlike heavy, distorted riffs years later like "Birthday." Mr. Williams's voice then comes in and blows even that big sound away. It's such a fun, silly song about being proud of his gangly girlfriend, it reminds you that pop-rock's stakes have been bid up so high most artists forget to have fun.

"Susie Q" Dale Hawkins
This is one of the savoriest, most enduring rockabilly guitar riffs ever created. Forget rockabilly, one of *the.* I really don't have a feeling for whether Dale himself baked it from scratch or it existed in folk form, but you sure heard it again and again after that. The drumming is fascinating, too—a swing basis but with lock-step eighth-note fills thrown in whenever the mood strikes. It gives the impression of a band with a loose feel pulling it together at dramatic intervals.

"Bye Bye Love" The Everly Brothers
As much as their marketing played up the backwoods-curiosity angle *(Songs Our Daddy Taught Us),* the Everly Brothers always sounded pretty damn modern. That minor 1-3-4 blues run-up on the guitar wasn't really ready to become a pop staple for another ten years.

"Blue Train" John Coltrane
I'm reading the Wiki on this and I'm finding out how "Lazy Bird" was

the first one to do chord changes that were brutal sequential major thirds down (I, uh, think), and those were the "giant steps" of the next album, and you can tell a good jazz soloist by his ability to follow that stuff. I'm blushing a little when I admit that this inspired me to illustrate my reaction to "Blue Train" in a way that shows off my musicological background a little. It's on the third repetition of that great theme hook, and it goes something like this: "Wow! Oh my God! *A normal chord!* Trane is my main freaking man!" I've never heard anyone express the thought before, but I like that John sets me up the right way to be excited by the conventional by framing it with the unconventional.

"Chances Are" Johnny Mathis

Johnny Mathis has to have the greatest native vocal gift of any modern stylist. The sheer resonance of his voice is a match for any of my favorites in that area—David Gilmour comes to mind—but with an arsenal of technique that assures world domination. He can invoke a full vibrato instantaneously and sustain it indefinitely. This allows him to send the message of being the master practitioner of the emotion he's capturing. Any song on this list will do for many occasions, but if you want the first dance at my wedding, it has to be "Chances Are."

"Bemsha Swing" Thelonious Monk

The strident, indelible theme, highly accessible but punctuated with piano that reminds the listener it's juggling some dissonance, is the kinetic center of *Brilliant Corners,* which with *Monk's Music* constitutes one of the great late flowerings of a top artist's productivity, in time for Monk to enjoy overdue appreciation as a major figure. But I'll bet you fans know the important issue here: what in God's name does "Bemsha" mean? I was all ready to go with a theory that it comes from notation, as in, you start on B then go to E minor (Em), but I couldn't make that work—a quick listen suggests it's really in C, and I think it has to be in C to work with horn keying.

"That'll Be the Day" The Crickets

The extra words "when I die" constitute one of the best little melodic resolutions in pop music. So does the lyric hook: telling his girl her threats to leave him aren't serious *because* it would kill him is extremely clever. Together these present important early evidence of rock and roll's potential for sophistication. The great skill of rock composition was right-sizing the value added: folk, country, and blues could be almost anti-compositional, and modern classical, jazz, and even Broadway could be insensitive to how much novelty the ear wants to absorb on one listen, compared with how much the writer wants to dish out. Rock and roll's founding fathers found the sweet spot.

"Jailhouse Rock" Elvis Presley

Leiber and Stoller's "Jailhouse Rock" is the most powerful statement of rock and roll as an admirable and sustainable way of life. I haven't

heard many people claim to literally "believe in rock and roll" and not really mean either that they cling to deliberate recklessness embarrassingly late in life, or only that they are happy to dismiss any musical style requiring a hint of open-mindedness. But rock and roll at its best is an enlightening synthesis of Western culture that makes life a party that no one isn't invited to. It's the good news that at the end of the day, the people getting their kicks can be the people who do the right thing. Like the Jesus of John's gospel, Elvis turns our attention directly to society's outcasts—in this case, hardened criminals rotting in prison. I don't think it's out of order to observe that rock and roll's architects were for the most part observant Christians and Jews; rock and roll's ultimate vision isn't the ecstatic liberation of the mob from its own perceived mores, it's an intervention on behalf of those on the wrong end of the mob's collective scorn—it takes on the work of Old Testament prophets. It's "Number 47" saying "to Number 3/You're the cutest jailbird I ever did see." Like *Some Like It Hot,* this song asks for a pass as a put-on, but the listener is encouraged not to be a person who has a *real problem* with either the suffering of the guilty being relieved, or, hey, how about with men pairing up with other "cute" men? In that spirit of tolerance, even the unpopular among the rejects is okay in the rock and roll dispensation: to the one who's "Over in the corner sittin' all alone": "If you can't find a partner, use a wooden chair!" This is not an easy lyrical and vocal burden to handle, even where the handling is close to wild abandon, and Elvis tears the roof off like no one else could, leaving the subtleties intact. He *is* the King.

"Somewhere" *West Side Story* **Original Cast Recording**

I love the unprofessional-sounding mic distance and electrical pops at the beginning of this recording—as if the most magnificent passage in popular music were about to go down and no one was thinking in terms of ceremonious archival, some techie just happened to have tape rolling. For being such a monument of invention, the original ballet soundtrack today gives a hint of leaning too heavily on stodgy vocal technique—stage diction and operatic projection—yet I like these decisions and have a feeling that a hundred years from now, they will stand the project in good stead. I approach "Somewhere" after first having heard dozens of attempts to replace Carol Lawrence's textbook delivery with something more poppy, flowery, swinging. But that's somehow not where the soul of the material is situated. Dried out to Leonard Bernstein's string-quartet-heavy, slightly modern-classical orchestral arrangement, the dramatic and emotional range unfolds. Stephen Sondheim's lyrics are more obviously brilliant; this isn't everyday dreamy romance, this is the very future of dreamy romance hanging in the balance. "Peace and quiet and open air" is such a great, unlikely choice of words. The characters are canaries in a mine shaft running out of air, with no escape from the encircling mechanics of urban violence. Carol Lawrence's vocal, slightly constrained as it may give the first impression of being, is awe-inspiring and moving in its technique: that vibrato that speeds up as the emotion gathers is remarkable. For all that, center stage here really belongs to Bernstein. Absurd as it must be to try to choose the very best popular melody of an era, this is probably the front-runner,

and the arrangement is decorated with nuanced and informed musical decisions it would be beyond me to make, but that I find relentlessly engaging. The big dramatic arc is where the first “some day, somewhere” climax diverges to the bridge—“We’ll find a new way of living/We’ll find a way of forgiving” is a choice plot reference—and then the final climax adds the resolution on “Somehow/Some day/Somewhere.” The choir and booming bass in the coda add soundtrack tone poetry suggesting a landscape so bombed-out that finding the way to peace is a pressing matter of survival: your survival and mine, not someone else’s, and not next year but tomorrow. The message hasn’t drifted toward irrelevance.

1958

"Good Golly Miss Molly" Little Richard
My wife Kristine asked me what I knew about 1958, since I was born in 1960. Fundamentally, not a damn thing; it's great to occasionally be too young for something. I do know that when you go back as far as 1958, things were different. Jazz was dominant at the highbrow end of things. Rock and roll was still riding its initial wave of success, and with Elvis in the army, people were able to take a little break from objecting to the King's "gyrating" and resume having Little Richard just plain scare the hell out of them.

"I'm Gonna Love You Too" Buddy Holly
Here's another exuberant smash from the great Mr. Holly. Buddy's melodies have an imaginative Anglo-Germanic folk music rectilinearity to them, reminiscent of the best polka in the same way as something like "The Happy Wanderer." His ability to capture that kind of static oom-pah musical value in vivacious rock is one indicator of why he was exceptional.

"Mambo Gozon" Tito Puente and His Orchestra
This is the first recording that springs to mind when I try to pick the very best-*sounding* record I've ever heard. I was ready to credit Tom Dowd's engineering because he did some Tito Puente sessions, but really it wasn't Tom—Mickey Crofford is the producer, and it's not on Tom's discography. The singers on this successor to Cachao and Perez Prado's Cuban dance innovation are simply chanting *"A gozar este rico mambo* (enjoy this rich mambo)"; it's essentially an instrumental, and the polychromatic interplay of percussive and harmonic elements in real space is intoxicating to the ears.

"The Sermon" Jimmy Smith
This legendary twenty-minute jam gives the impression of a pure improv except for a little gem of an organ theme Jimmy must have brought in composed. Did I just say twenty minutes? I'd feel comfortable editing the thing down to about my favorite six minutes, except for my lack of sophistication as a jazz listener rendering me too cowed to actually attempt such a thing. My God, I hear someone say, this philistine cut out where Tina Brooks overblew a forward aerial submediant ascent while hopping on one foot—does he just hate life? So this sits a little out of character amid my generally stingy time slot allocations. There's a lot of great playing to be sure, including what constitutes my main exposure to guitarist Kenny Burrell, but still—allowing a twenty-minute jazz cut; that feels like I've failed as a shallow smartass.

"Stagger Lee" Lloyd Price

Greil Marcus wrote a history of the folk ballads that have been based on the 1895 St. Louis murder of "Stagger" Lee Shelton, the only exponent of which I know about is Lloyd Price's hit. Sounding a lot slicker even than the post-comeback "Just Because" (which I also love) from about a year earlier, Price's "Stagger Lee" is a high-production affair as murder ballads go, where the scene is late night street corner gambling and the only remaining historically accurate detail is a dispute over Lee's hat that he settled with a bullet.

"Dancing in the Dark" Cannonball Adderley

I chose this romantic material, one of the better showcases of Adderley's facility with fluid runs, rather than a longer opus with Miles from the classic *Somethin' Else*. Adderley has had to compete with Coltrane for history's attention, and there's a mannerism and even economy here that Coltrane doesn't quite do.

"One for My Baby" Frank Sinatra

Here's one of Frank's most amazing deliveries. It's emotionally pitch-perfect, as usual, and whereas I often hear more about his exceptional breath control than is obvious to my ears (you mean, say, compared with Johnny Mathis's breath control?), on this one you can really hear the volume drop to a soft plateau and lock onto a perfectly controlled vibrato in a way that would challenge almost any good singer.

"Rumble" Link Wray and His Wray Men

"Rumble" already sounds like bad news every step of the way, from the lumbering scale-indifferent bass line to the manhandled strings in the fuzz guitar–pioneering performance—then they go and name it "Rumble"! This can't have been helping the cause of making fun of squares who thought rock and roll was the cause of juvenile delinquency.

"Tequila" The Champs

The sax work by Danny "Chuck Rio" Flores is the highlight of this surprise B-side hit, if you don't count Pee Wee Herman's alluring signature dance. "Tequila" illustrates an essential difference between 1958 and now; in 1958, there were very capable musicians more or less sitting around on salary who could do what they do and almost accidentally produce a hit record.

"La Bamba" Ritchie Valens

The other big 1958 accidental B-side hit was "La Bamba," highlighted by the guitar, which I think is Valens himself. It's a great, funny song, Valens adding a rock beat to one clever strain of a traditional Mexican folk tune: *"para bailar la bamba* (to dance the Swing/Stomp(?)) *se necesita una poca de gracia* (you need a little grace, humor)… *Yo no soy marinero/Soy capitán* (I'm not a sailor, I'm the captain)." According to Wikipedia, the ersatz music authority's very best friend, Valens had to learn the song phonetically; he'd spoken only English his whole life.

“Milestones” Miles Davis
This high-precision, breezy, uptempo composition reminds me a little of the 6/8 scherzo in Beethoven’s ninth—playful little up-and-down melody in the hands of a master, showing off the ability to sustain the delay on the notes for whole lines at a time. This was the first line-up with both Coltrane and Adderley; perhaps slightly more challenging a listen than *Kind of Blue*—but only by dint of being more energetic, less relaxed and stretched out. I find it every bit as enjoyable: the *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* to *Kind of Blue’s Dark Side of the Moon.*

“Summertime Blues” Eddie Cochran
“Summertime Blues” is such a perfect creation—the way the acoustic guitar answers the chord changes, the way the low voice mocks authority on the second line of the choruses. Eddie Cochran wasn’t making up that stuff about being too young to vote; he really *was* only nineteen when this came out, and 21 when he died in a car crash.

“Blues March” Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers
I mentioned Neal Hefti’s *Odd Couple* theme (one of the near-misses on my 1968 list) in a Hank Mobley comment, and sax wizard Benny Golson’s “Blues March” is an even more interesting node in the genealogy, demonstrating the way that class of melody derives from blues on one hand and military march on the other. Yes, of course there was “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” before any of that, but the blues in that kind of song was less New Orleans, more filtered through swing. Mr. Blakey gets an unusual opportunity to pull out some two-stroke rolls.

“Peter Gunn” Henry Mancini
The James Bond spy music genre had a clear forerunner: this dry ice–cool private detective TV show theme by the inimitable Henry Mancini. This song is the reason B-52’s songs sound so resonant—walking blues turned evil with tritone brass and, in lieu of blue notes, hard major and minor thirds pitted against each other.

“All I Have to Do Is Dream” The Everly Brothers
The “whenever I want you” line teases a phenomenal amount of emotion out of a simple doo-wop progression, and of course Phil and Don execute the delivery so perfectly you don’t worry about the two of them dreaming of that same girl’s lips. Another difference from 1958 is that it would no longer occur to songwriters to glorify longing as an end in itself, let alone have the wherewithal to get it right in a universally accessible lyric.

“Johnny B. Goode” Chuck Berry
I make this Chess single a tie for the most important rock and roll song with “Jailhouse Rock.” They’re both fundamentally about

maintaining a love of life and a good attitude toward your fellow man in hard times; beyond that, their strengths are very different. “Johnny B. Goode” was of course the perfection of the Chuck Berry riff—still a staple of rock playing when I learned guitar in 1969—whose instrumental intro pattern situated the electric guitar as the movement’s reactor core, elevating that instrument to the realm of myth. The lyric has obvious, perhaps well-worn populist rags-to-riches appeal, yet as “All I Have to Do Is Dream” triumphs by celebrating the dream in isolation from its fulfillment, “Johnny B. Goode” triumphs by celebrating the rags in isolation from the riches. As the song ends, Johnny is still carrying his guitar in that same gunny sack; the point of the song is the few scattered souls who cheer him, in whose chorus we’re invited to join in. Cheering on a peer to success is not something people do naturally, and Mr. Berry provides an infectious lesson on how to do it with the immortal “Go Johnny Go,” one of the catchiest refrains of the century, and the antecedent of spontaneous explosions of sixties good vibes like “Yeah Yeah Yeah.”

1959

"Saturday Night (Is the Loneliest Night of the Week)" Frank Sinatra
The famous February plane crash in which Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper perished was Don McLean's famous "day the music died": a new, cooler musical vocabulary could be heard taking shape in 1959—this would be the native language of the creative explosion that occurred in the sixties—but for on-message pop, the year was bleak. Rock and roll must have seemed at risk of being over. Certainly times were never better for the ever-resurrecting Frank Sinatra, who followed the nuanced *Sings for Only the Lonely* with the smash hit cocktail party swing of *Come Dance with Me!* This upbeat lost-love shrug about the night "friends come to ball" reads as backward-looking today, but the precision of the band, the audio, and of course the vocals, are timeless.

"Sea Cruise" Frankie Ford with Huey "Piano" Smith and Orchestra
Smith is the originator here, and his authentic New Orleans boogie is utterly indispensable. However, to be completely honest, I think Frankie Ford's flown-in vocal is what really makes this special. With rock intangibles going wrong left and right as the fifties waned, Ford got the sheer phrasing of key words righter than right. The little—not overdone—yelp on "oo wee," the emphatic plosive of "baby," the snarl and tiny power-vibrato on "won't": perfect energy. That *horrible* ship's fog horn sound effect is just crazy enough to work.

"Chronology" Ornette Coleman
The Shape of Jazz to Come was one of the more audacious and successful acts of musical originality. Although carefully composed and faithful to the theme-solos-theme jazz composition pattern, the rules of chord basis and modulation were largely thrown out. Once you get used to it, the theme of a bop-derived piece like "Chronology" is spirited and forthcoming—and even before that much absorption, the material gives no impression of being either tossed-off or contentious, but rather of setting up for some unusually fancy playing, sax playing that hints at something like an articulate person talking fast and making good points.

"Climb Ev'ry Mountain" *The Sound of Music* Original Cast Recording
To citizens of the intervening years of pop music mainstream, Patricia Neway's trilling operatic warble sounds no less Martian than Ornette Coleman. Fine performance though it be, there are some fatigued signifiers of pomp and circumstance to listen through to get to one of the most sublime Richard Rodgers melodies and Oscar Hammerstein's well-tuned lyric set. "Follow every rainbow till you find your dream,"

in the wrong hands, is just encouragement to be selfish, and corny encouragement at that; Hammerstein shapes that with, "A dream that will need all the love you can give/Every day of your life for as long as you live." This statement thus qualified in terms of loving commitment, we can feel good about this coming from a Mother Abbess.

"Come Go Home with Me" Lightnin' Hopkins
Here's the most entertaining track from the informal, personable Folkways session (it also includes, for instance, a track of nothing but spoken reminiscences about mentor Blind Lemon Jefferson). Besides flurries of amazing guitar work, Poor Lightnin' does what is more or less a stream-of-consciousness stand-up comedy routine through the whole song. "I wouldn't lie for nothing/Before I lie, I'll shut my mouth/My wife she tells me you're lying, Sam, every time you walk about/Don't call me no liar/Make me mad." It's very hard not to crack a big smile as all of this goes on.

"Sleep Walk" Santo and Johnny
A beautifully evocative palm-trees-and-moonlight doo-wop instrumental, "Sleep Walk" takes the bold step of turning the lead melody over to steel guitar—which must have led directly to those pungent moving fourths after the high notes that are so essential to the melodic arc.

"Twisted" Lambert, Hendricks & Ross
It ought to threaten embarrassment as badly dated swinger humor, but it's just far too good: Joni Mitchell covered it on tastemaker gold standard *Court and Spark* some fifteen years later, and no one blinked. Loosely in the breezy, conversational style of Bobby Troup's "Route 66," it's a piece of analyst's-couch humor set to piano bar jazz, and like a lot of recordings of the period, it sounds like a million bucks just from an audiophile perspective, and it's an all-around fine piece of music, too.

"El Paso" Marty Robbins
With its expert Spanish guitar and an impressively personalized start-to-finish verse narrative about a flare-up killing over a girl in a cantina, this is a true ballad, with that genre's full storytelling entertainment value. More remarkably, in a year with quite a bit of competition, I would guess that more people would be able to recognize and hum "Out in the west Texas town of El Paso…" than any other song here ("I Only Have Eyes for You" would be competition, but that's a standard from 1934).

"Desperate Man Blues" John Fahey (Blind Joe Death)
Fahey's pressing of 100 copies of his independent *Blind Joe Death* album turned out to be a milestone for the outsider music aesthetic. With both an unprecedented scrupulousness for these solo acoustic

guitar performances' stylistic place in history and a love of making up stories about their creation (like the fictitious personage Blind Joe Death), Fahey was the perfect architect of a fantasy league style that worked to preserve the elements to which it paid homage. Beautifully performed, almost entirely American—sometimes Celtic in precedence—this music was always at least 50% blues, but allowed for opportunities to show off modern classical mood swings and intricate Appalachian picking. Fahey's beautiful recordings of blues legend Skip James were probably responsible for people like me knowing about Skip James, and Fahey's work shows signs of being as enduring as the blues greats—with strong support among people with ears as good as Jim O'Rourke's.

"I Only Have Eyes for You" The Flamingos

Nate Nelson was the singer on what is perhaps the most fully realized doo-wop recording, even if the doo-wop elements themselves are arguably not absolutely integral. It may be more thematic to say this is one of the nicest and most atmospheric uses of reverb and tremolo in a pop recording. There's a mad genius to the little sequence of guitar chords in the beginning—they don't give much of a clue where they're going—followed by the "My love must be a kind of blind love" verse, followed by the hook verse. But the very coolest moment is about 25 seconds from the end, on the last "for you"; the situation calls for a corny resolution, but the lead vocal hangs on the same note and the band goes to the opening pattern, a bracing fourth away.

"What'd I Say, Pt. 1" Ray Charles

The first four notes of that Wurlitzer riff really say it all; this is a new standard for low and lean grooves that would be the benchmark for years. It makes such a point of that minor seventh in the major chord, achieving a synthesis of blues and Latin inflections. From there, it's all execution: Ray Charles's solid gold playing, singing, and capturing what feels like the energy of a fully engaged live audience in a studio, improv-like call-and-response pattern intact.

"All Blues" Miles Davis

I like "All Blues" a little better than the perennial favorite "So What"; I guess it comes down to finding the famous "modal" decisions more exotic and compelling: they bring a lot to mind. A famously easy entry for non-fans of jazz, *Kind of Blue* is no more challenging than the average Steely Dan song; for years, it has been one of my favorite albums to put on during a nice dinner.

"Take Five" Dave Brubeck

Another indelible main theme, Paul Desmond's cool-jazzy "Take Five" is part of Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* concept album of odd time signatures, and one of the few natural-sounding 5/4 time signature songs (another amazing success at that is Jethro Tull's "Living in the Past").

“Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” Charles Mingus

Listening to producer Teo Macero, one of the people responsible for studio projects getting out-of-this-world results in a way that—for reasons I don’t fully understand—doesn’t happen in the ostensibly superior computer recording age, you get a feeling for the living entity that a studio was in those days. Besides the sheer magic of electro-mechanical response, the process of having to achieve an engineering design innovation to get a sound is different from the process of downloading a plug-in to get a sound. As much as I love ProTools, there’s too much room in many contexts to fail at the level of priorities. It’s kind of like, what if Orson Welles had a program that converted a script into images of actors giving perfect performances, so all Welles worked on all day was which way the lighting was coming from in each scene, because someone still has to *decide* that? If a project’s decision matrix isn’t somehow mapped so as to coincide with decisions talented people make when they deploy those talents, it just becomes too hard a job to direct. With that in mind, I think of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” its title a dedication to the recently deceased Lester Young, with its miking capturing the measured flow of air through John Handy’s and Booker Ervin’s tenor saxes. The engineering is right next to the music, and the music is right next to life, which is in a state of awareness of loss of life. It’s probably my single favorite jazz recording, and a record of a great past intelligence of process.

1960

"Apache" The Shadows
Brian Epstein was famously rebuffed by some British record exec who told him something like, "Go back to Liverpool, Mr. Epstein, 'four-groups' are out." I've never been entirely clear on the "four-groups" (four-person musical combos, I assume) that had such a heyday before the Beatles that they could be said to be "out," but with their suits and guitars, the Shadows look the part. An instrumental band, they must have been a reaction to the Ventures, and this is an amazingly cool, respectably arranged recording. That's a pretty Ziggy Stardust–sounding use of acoustic guitar. But as I look at this list, I realize that the abstract mental picture I had built up of 1960–1963 being inhabited by a rising and falling wave of "four-groups"—of which the guitar instrumental contingent was a minor subgroup—seems not to bear out in any reality I've been able to discover.

"Exodus" Ferrante and Teicher
Hum the first four notes to Ernest Gold's epic theme to anyone in the world, and chances are there's a percentage of people who can name that tune to rival Mozart or Beethoven. The occasional avant-garde leanings of Ferrante and Teicher were not enough to keep frequent unfortunate Liberace-esque trills out of the proceedings.

"Will You Love Me Tomorrow" The Shirelles
With a melodic arc worthy of the more serious stage—that happens to get right to the point—and a likewise decidedly believable lyric of romantic misgivings—that happens to be played for teens—and its pocket orchestral arrangement, this was the breakthrough song for the amazing Brill Building songwriters Carole King and Gerry Goffin. Four years later, the Beatles were to produce their first self-composed album, causing the songwriting-for-hire industry to dry up virtually overnight.

"Four on Six" Wes Montgomery
Unusual as a guitar-led jazz act, Wes Montgomery was, for whatever my limited perspective is worth, probably the premier electric guitar soloist at this time. This is a fascinating composition, going a certain distance out by letting angular, almost robotic patterns create interesting chromatics, then reeling them back into a fairly mellow, bossa nova–like realm. The instrumental skill here is worthy of repeated double-takes.

"Ten Thousand Miles" Penny and Jean
Penny Palmer and Jean Amos—Jean later joined the also lavishly gifted Womenfolk—were eighteen years old when they recorded the now-borderline-lost album *Two for the Road.* They're both from serious

musical families, but that only begins to explain the recording's jaw-dropping sophistication. I wish it weren't such a lost cause to seek this out, say on iTunes, because it would be worth a buck to anyone just to marvel at the refined delivery and worldly musicality of this piece which, almost unbelievably, is a self-composition. A young woman's pining for an absent lover is signified in, "Who's going to shoe her foot/Who's going to glove her hand?" An impressively authentic-sounding pancultural folk air, but one that winks with the humor of: not that I won't miss *you,* honey, but, my God, *what if I can't shop for shoes?*

"Money (That's What I Want)" Barrett Strong
With its satanically altered piano boogie riff and its greed theme, which though played for humor is still a good slap in the face, this was perhaps rock's most significant early peak in brainy pagan implacability on the way to Iggy and the Stooges. John Lennon smelled genius here for his Beatles cover, which dusts the original's backing vocals, but otherwise can't touch Mr. Strong's recording, especially on the howl of "That's what I wa-ha-ha-ant."

"Shakin' All Over" Johnny Kidd and the Pirates
It must have seemed nearly unthinkable that English people could rock in 1960, but damn, this is the real thing: it lacks the sheer loose energy, but in most respects keeps right up with Johnny Burnette or Dale Hawkins.

"Dig Dis" Hank Mobley
Wynton Kelly's gymnastic piano intro makes a splashy first impression, and the rock solid Mr. Mobley takes it from there on this compelling, swinging blues that feels like a great-uncle to the likes of Neal Hefti's 1968 *Odd Couple* theme. That's Art Blakey on drums.

"Cathy's Clown" The Everly Brothers
The Everly Brothers stayed interesting and surprisingly versatile well into the sixties as their popularity waned unfairly, but it hadn't waned yet when the curiously monumental "Cathy's Clown" hit big. It's an incisive lyric about a cheated-on boyfriend, with a boldly martial drum pattern and harmonic cadences that were forerunners of a class of haunting Lennon motifs such as would be heard in "All I've Got to Do" and "Not a Second Time."

"Concierto de Aranjuez" Miles Davis
Barring my judgment being unreliable, which is virtually certain, *Sketches of Spain* can really be called a Gil Evans record—he seems to be the one responsible for transforming the adagio from Joaquin Rodrigo's guitar and orchestra "Concierto de Aranjuez" into sixteen minutes of flute harmonies and modernist turns that resemble the composed score for an episode of *Star Trek* or a Clint Eastwood film almost as much as they do jazz—or Spanish folk. I'm not entirely

comfortable with all 16 minutes of it, but it's so auspicious I'd be afraid of editing anything out, lest in a week I find a reason the missing piece is actually brilliant.

"Walk Don't Run" The Ventures
Situated at the intersection point between Bach and Spanish folk, the Ventures' powerhouse rendition of Johnny Smith's "Walk Don't Run" is a key component of the 1960s soundscape. This solid, vibrant, drum-rolling rave-up is probably the most all-around enjoyable of the great guitar instrumentals.

"Theme from *A Summer Place*" Percy Faith and His Orchestra
It's not just an easy listening piece, it's *the* easy listening piece—ubiquitous in the Luckys and Montgomery Wards of my childhood. But I'm certain this isn't sentimental attachment; it occupies a categorically separate part of my psyche from equal contenders with fancier pedigrees like "Poor People of Paris" or "The Girl from Ipanema." A combination of the almost impossibly wistful composition of Max Steiner (he also wrote the *Gone with the Wind* music, which does little for me) and Percy Faith's inspired arrangement and flawless execution—love the pizzicato strings and French horns—the blush of ironic distance it invites is annihilated by the pure joy of listening to it.

"Shop Around" The Miracles
This is really the first record that sounded like the sixties. The intro —"When I became of age my mother called me to her side"—sounds pointedly old-timey fifties, but then the verse comes in and pow, suddenly you're in the world of go-go boots and Ford Mustangs. With the seventh chord accents, busy backing vocals, and out-of-nowhere chord changes going into the chorus, it's the one song on this list that could *almost* be on *Help* or *Rubber Soul.* Speaking of: another underappreciated sixties architect, George Harrison, *was* unrestrained in his praise of Smokey Robinson.

"Spoonful" Howlin' Wolf
One of the greatest of the great Chess blues 45s, this traditional blues, tracing to Charlie Patton, came ostensibly with the Willie Dixon imprint. A canny observation of the pittance life-and-death matters can revolve around, it's too bad the supremely economical vibrancy of Wolf's delivery has a chance of being confused with Cream's dreary, interminable guitar jam version on the mostly terrific *Wheels of Fire.*

"All My Trials" Joan Baez
"All My Trials" would be my answer to, "Quick, what's the best vocal performance of the rock era?" I could probably come up with a few I like better, but this would take the early lead. The signature rapid vibrato is amazingly rich and clear; it's not a tremolo—there's a strong constant volume—yet it has a lot of some kind of play without there

being a dimension of phonying the note like a typical operatic soprano. As far as I can tell it's a literal mother's death song to the children about to survive her, strictly biblical in its outlook.

"Syeeda's Song Flute" John Coltrane

One of the more playful pieces on *Giant Steps,* the Thelonious Monk–influenced theme of "Syeeda's Song Flute" segues to a glorious moment of that trademark Coltrane almost-sharp tenor on the fundamental, giving way to a devastating cascade of allusions, harmonics, and indefinable mastery on the all-too-brief lead sax solo. I don't blame myself too much for getting antsy waiting through the piano and bass solos for those little toots of Coltrane reprising the theme.

"Try to Remember" Jerry Orbach, *The Fantasticks* Original Cast Recording

Nothing about the beautifully wrought yet comfy standard "Try to Remember" prepared me for finally experiencing the bizarreness that is *The Fantasticks,* history's longest-running off-Broadway production. It's Shakespearean in its comic sweep—two fathers use reverse psychology to get their offspring to fall in love—yet with kabuki and theater of the absurd overtones that disrupt its family entertainment veneer; "Try to Remember" is sung by El Gallo, a sort of surrealistic troubadour mercenary who sells the idea of a fake kidnapping notoriously referred to in the script as "the rape." So, I stopped picturing Perry Como in a cardigan.

1961

"I Pity the Fool" Bobby "Blue" Bland
1961 offers a long, loving look at the great American postwar musical institutions, nowadays with the knowledge that it's something of a last group picture before the Beatles' Sixties were to blow them all off the map. This Bobby Bland recording makes it clear that the stakes were high when it came to what was to be lost and gained; little in the Beatles canon, dominating though it be, achieves the balance of pathos and comic timing in, "Look at the people/I know you wonder what they're doing/They're just standing there/Watching you make a fool of me."

"Doozy" Benny Carter & Quincy Jones and His Orchestra
Venerable Benny Carter gave a start in the forties to Miles Davis, and to a young Quincy Jones here. This great theme riff is essentially a big band swing piece, with just enough bebop edge to sound fresh in 1961 and fresh today.

"Town Without Pity" Gene Pitney
Gene Pitney had one of those fascinating careers. He played piano well enough to do Rolling Stones sessions, he wrote "He's a Rebel" and "Hello Mary Lou," and this melodramatic yelp isn't the best demonstration of his vocal skills. Nor is it the best music from Dmitri Tiomkin (who is the guy who wrote *Station to Station's* "Wild Is the Wind"). But there's something classic and special about the almost accidental capture of alienation that goes beyond that of either the teenage lovers in the song or the more sinister situation in the movie for which it served as the title song.

"You Don't Miss Your Water" William Bell
The debut single from a pillar of Memphis soul and Stax Records who put out the original version of Aretha's "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man" and co-wrote "Born Under a Bad Sign," this is not in fact that kind of listen-to-*this* record, but an experience that sinks in, just like the title sentiment ("You don't miss your water till the well runs dry").

"The Red Rooster" Howlin' Wolf
Usually referred to as "Little Red Rooster" since the Rolling Stones used that title variation for their U.K. blues revival hit (I learned from Wikipedia that Sam Cooke is really the one who changed the title), this Willie Dixon song as well as the performance—on which Willie played bass—have a timeless slide guitar coolness. People's imaginations apparently do different things with the fact that there's no peace in the barnyard when the little red rooster is too lazy to crow for days.

“Stand by Me” Ben E. King
An interesting thing about “Stand by Me” is what a delayed response song it is. Ben E. King apparently couldn’t even convince the Drifters to record it, so he did it solo. I didn’t personally start caring about it until John Lennon covered it in 1975. It became a gleaming golden classic in retrospect in the eighties, with the advent of the movie of the same name. I think a song with a common chord progression that’s about commitment probably always seems boring at the time, and later people think, “oh, that’s that quaint old way everyone used to do things,” and have no particular trouble becoming fond of it.

“Gloria’s Step” Bill Evans
Sunday at the Village Vanguard, the piano album for people who like bass, is one of those canonical recordings from the days when jazz was an experience treated by the likes of *Downbeat* magazine with reverence appropriate to basic human liberty or Zen enlightenment. Breezy in its sympathy with Ornette and the freers from jazz’s perceptions of modal tyranny, we have the piano pre-hook, then the piano hook, and then basically several minutes of the bass of 25-year-old L.A. studio hotshot Scott LaFaro (the tune’s composer) making a lifetime’s worth of emancipatory gestures, ten days before he died in an auto accident.

“A Shot of Rhythm and Blues” Arthur Alexander
Like Smokey Robinson’s “Shop Around,” this is a recording that starts building the foundation of sixties pop in earnest, updating Huey “Piano” Smith’s “Rockin’ Pneumonia” blueprint with a harder rock edge and a dead-cool slapback echo effect on the vocal. The Beatles would be covering it in their BBC broadcasts within a couple of years.

“Hide Away” Freddie King
A huge influence on the heavy blues guitar contingent of the sixties and seventies, Freddie King telegraphed an incredible hand strength—the sheer precision and power of his playing put it in a class by itself. The unforgettable chorus riff of “Hide Away” was bar band rock—as it would start appearing around 1968—practically fully formed.

“Finnegan’s Wake” The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem
This is the Irish drinking ballad that gave the surrealist James Joyce book its title (Joyce’s removal of the apostrophe was typical of the book’s chopping of language into a sort of Jabberwocky inviting all the puns and echoes the ear can take). The Clancy Brothers were just breaking as national stars with *Ed Sullivan Show*–level exposure. They do a fine job of rendering the idiom, but the standout aspect is really what a strong melodic composition the song is—way more like “I’m Looking Through You” than any other song from the 1850s, I can just about guarantee.

“The Wanderer” Dion

I used to think nothing of this recording, but the more I get to know it, the more I like it. First of all, it *sounds* like a million bucks—really a hot, hi-fi rock and roll recording. The vocals must have been a challenge of theatrics, and they're pulled off with adept comic delivery—to the three girls he's seeing today is added the fourth tattooed on his chest—as well as world-class pop technique. More impressively, they sustain a sad and serious note for those listening closely: "I'm happy as a clown/With my two fists of iron/But I'm going nowhere."

"Little Sister" Elvis Presley
Here's the King of Rock and Roll revisiting a fairly straight rockabilly style, but with a slick, updated production that anticipates Creedence or "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress." A slightly witless low harmony toward the end doesn't stop this from being one of my five favorite Elvis records, and Elvis vocals.

"At Last" Etta James
Not more than a modest hit at the time, this lushly orchestrated, controlled soul blues tear-up of the forties Glenn Miller standard has elevated Etta James to the ranks of premier artist. She brings a remarkable emotional immediacy to the understanding of deep romantic love being something long waited for.

"Hoe Down" Oliver Nelson
How does someone come up with an album title as cool as *Blues and the Abstract Truth?* The composed theme is an amazing riff on the Appalachian motif—18 years after Aaron Copland's somewhat different modern classical stylings—with acrobatic close harmonies leading into the improv section. With Bill Evans, Eric Dolphy, and Freddie Hubbard in the session, it's a wonder of technical execution.

"Hit the Road Jack" Ray Charles
I've caught up a little with the world's rigorous categorization of chord progressions that I made early parochial attempts to articulate, and now in my enlightened state I can simply mention that "Hit the Road Jack" is an example of a Malaguena progression and not have to, for instance, further torture the words "Spanish Folk." I've always loved "Hit the Road Jack"; the arc of "no more, no more, no more" is a brilliant leap of the imagination, and an unbelievable amount of entertainment is crammed into about 1:45.

"I Fall to Pieces" Patsy Cline
I don't do a whole lot of country, but Patsy Cline for sure gets a place of honor. Willie Nelson's "Crazy," also from 1961, is of course another Patsy Cline standard; the melody of "I Fall to Pieces" grabs me a bit more. To friends who want her to forget the man who left her, the response of "I've tried, and I've tried, but I haven't yet" is somehow just the right direct and understated way to make us really feel the

hurt.

"Aisha" John Coltrane
The ravishing theme, written by pianist McCoy Tyner, is one of the high points of jazz; Reggie Workman's slow, swinging bass part ends hanging on a contemplative ninth, ushering in Coltrane's unforgettable counterpoint melody; Freddie Hubbard and Eric Dolphy provide the pyrotechnics.

"Runaway" Del Shannon
A denizen of moldy oldies collections my whole life, this is a fantastic little composition on close scrutiny. Max Crook's nimble Musitron keyboard solo (over a Malaguena progression!) is a bizarre but perfect addition to a song that is otherwise deceptively simple—just the first two chords of a standard doo-wop progression repeated over and over. Shannon's vocal and lyrics are wonderful. The hook is of course that falsetto "I wa-wa-wa-wa-wonder," but the emotional energy for me is in the resolution of, "And I wonder where she will stay/My little runaway." Somehow it opens the song into the night: a familiar lost love theme becomes a tangible concern for the well-being of another, and the bittersweet mystery of new beginnings.

"Moon River" Henry Mancini
With Leonard Bernstein, Henry Mancini was the great instigator of late-fifties pop eclecticism in serious music. They worked on top-dollar Broadway and film projects, and like George Gershwin before them, they had a mastery of orchestral forms and brought a keen interest in integrating jazz, blues, and Latin elements. Their facility with melody, the range of their talent, and the resources they commanded seem unlikely to come into the world again. Someone like John Williams could conceivably be said to enjoy something like a similar exaltation (I thought *Jurassic Park* was a very good score; I could take or leave *Star Wars),* but putting aside his potential to rise to the height of "Moon River" according to his native abilities, the world simply doesn't put the same gun to his head and insist he be, in a word, charming. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* the movie is well inferior to "Moon River" the theme song, but I'd attempt to illustrate my point by asserting that Truman Capote and Audrey Hepburn can tap into charm in the same way the song can. The melody of "Moon River" is sentimental in the best sense—shamelessly evocative, but taciturn and expected at just the right moments. The lyrical oneness with the river is mystical: "Wherever you're going, I'm going your way" is a great line, as is all of "Two drifters off to see the world/There's such a lot of world to see/We're after the same rainbow's end/Waiting round the bend/My huckleberry friend/Moon river and me." "Rainbow's end" is almost sappy, but "huckleberry friend" is so weird (is that a description of color that calls Jim and Huck Finn to mind?) that it provides mooring as a kind of imagined colloquialism. The drum beat with two snare hits on two-and is so utterly wrong-headed in its interruption of momentum that it almost adds an avant-garde confrontationalism to the proceedings. But having nothing to do with

the ubiquitous, swinging facility of something like rock and roll is what charm is all about.

1962

"Man of Constant Sorrow" Bob Dylan
Dylan's first album was as far-sighted as it was mannered and at times overheated, anticipating higher-profile covers of the likes of "House of the Rising Sun" and "In My Time of Dyin'," as well as this also charming blues-harmonica variation on the ace in the hole from the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou.*

"Monster Mash" Bobby "Boris" Pickett and the Crypt-Kickers
"Monster Mash" was still rising from the dead as a revival hit in 1973, when I began listening to the radio obsessively. Neither 1962 nor 1973 was complete without this novelty graveyard smash, and neither was *Theme Time Radio Hour with Your Host Bob Dylan,* and neither is this collection.

"Cry to Me" Solomon Burke
More influence from Bob Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour:* I knew this first from the Rolling Stones' version, which is excellent, but—and here's where avoiding the movie *Dirty Dancing* can come back to bite you—I'd never heard Burke's, which is phenomenal. His vibrato-charged variation on the Little Richard wail is a premonition of John Fogerty.

"Up on the Roof" The Drifters
For clearly sounding like a hit, "Up on the Roof" communicates very directly at the person-to-person level. Written by the ever-capable and versatile Carole King and Gerry Goffin, it's some city-dweller talking about how when things get oppressive, he takes the stairs to the roof exit and hangs out until his cares "drift right into space," inviting the listener to join him. I think of it as the prototype for retreat themes in Brian Wilson's "In My Room" and Lennon's "There's a Place."

"The James Bond Theme" John Barry
There's one style of music from my early childhood of which we really don't hear sufficient historical account, considering it was *everywhere:* spy music. "Secret Agent Man," "Pink Panther," "Man from U.N.C.L.E.," "Get Smart"—you couldn't go a day without hearing some exotic tritone-laden theme, preferably with twangy guitar or Nelson Riddle horns. I'm nobody's source for historical accuracy, but John Barry's "James Bond Theme" seems eligible for some sizable claim of pioneering the genre, and still sounds ripping to this day.

"God Bless the Child" Sonny Rollins
One of my jazz mentors Jacques Darakdjian is primarily responsible for my appreciation of Sonny Rollins. The title cut from Rollins's

landmark album *The Bridge* is an example of his more intense work, but this version of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child" has the just plain beautiful tenor sax, highlighting his and guitarist Jim Hall's ability to listen deeply and respond to each other.

"Chains" The Cookies
If, like me, you weren't there, you can do a lot worse in attempting to understand pre-Beatles music than to hear it through the ears of the Beatles themselves. That the Beatles erected the critical edifice in which music that isn't self-composed verse/chorus lyric pop rock barely even *computes* is bizarre, given their willingness to cover blues, folk, and show tunes—and often recent releases. Within five years the idea of, say, the Doors releasing a version of last year's Who song had become absurd on the face of it. The Beatles rarely rescued bad originals; more typically the vocal arrangement was something they could equal, but the original still features arrangement details that were beyond their stylistic reach, such as the horns on the Cookies' "Chains."

"Some Other Guy" Richie Barrett
I think this is my favorite Leiber and Stoller song after "Jailhouse Rock," and Barrett gets writing credit, too. And if we don't add a credit to Ray Charles for just existing, that would feel like an oversight. You've seen that footage of the Beatles at the Cavern: crazed, packed crowd, Lennon up there doing his dress rehearsal for blowing the sensibilities of pop culture into the next decade. What's he playing? That's how cool "Some Other Guy" is.

"Watermelon Man" Herbie Hancock
The blues/gospel piano riff and Latin-flavored horns combined to anticipate a whole lot of sounds to come—Santana, to name one. This was cut with Dexter Gordon and some other luminaries just before Hancock joined Miles Davis's quintet.

"Boom Boom" John Lee Hooker
Very clean, precise, and hi-fi for a blues recording, it creates a greater impression of histrionics than anything actually performed. The holler after a couple of verses bespeaks a massive rave-up so emphatically that it takes some reflection to realize not much really went on to happen. If "Boom boom boom boom/I'm gonna shoot you right down" is too violent an attention-getter, the bit about, "I loves that talk/That baby talk" is at least as unforgettable, the more so for not seeming to half try to be.

"Twist and Shout" The Isley Brothers
In my direct experience, this was the song that wrote the book on driving a crowd into a screaming, head-shaking frenzy at a live show. I'm thinking most specifically of the shaking of Beatle mop tops as they screamed the final "ah," but I presume the Isley Brothers enjoyed

enough of the same effect, with their earlier top twenty version.

"Fleurette Africaine" Duke Ellington
This is a jewel from the late, apparently not overly formal *Money Jungle* super-session with Ellington, Charles Mingus (bass), and Max Roach (drums). It's an extremely graceful, reflective yet succinct start-to-end composition, with the occasional pang of modernist piano drama that reads momentarily as dissonance, but after a moment's absorption settles into a more familiar jazz vocabulary. Certainly the special guest star is Mingus's bass, accented by some sort of hammered trill that to me would have seemed like a crazy idea at the time, but keeps the mood fresh and exotic when it's not impossible to imagine it otherwise shading toward morose.

"The Loco-Motion" Little Eva
According to All Music Guide, Carol King and Gerry Goffin wrote this for Little Eva, who at the time was their babysitter. It's a fantastic sounding record, and for being one of those songs that tell you what dance you should do and was probably never thought of by anyone as anything but the most disposable possible fad entertainment, it's been strangely durable, with Grand Funk and Kylie Minogue covers in later decades (in weird ways okay, but don't do what I did: watch these and the original on YouTube and weep for the decline of civilization).

"Love Me Do" The Beatles
This could still almost be a very good left-field Northern Britain novelty act where one bloke plays a nice enough harmonica. There's something just out of mental reach in the unapologetic way they hang a blue note on "you know" amid the hillbilly harmonies that whispers devastation.

"Anna (Go to Him)" Arthur Alexander
A little more personal and effortless than the Lennon performance. Alexander has a bit of Elvis star quality: "you give back your ring to *may*." I just heard on Bob Dylan's *Theme Time Radio Hour* that Arthur quit music soon after and worked driving a van for most of his life.

"Night Train" James Brown and the Famous Flames
I suppose it's a little odd to pick a James Brown track that I believe contains practically nothing from the Godfather of Soul but shouting out the names of some big cities, but Mr. Brown's legendary approach to quality control yields an uncommonly sharp and listenable rendition of the 1952 blues standard.

"Telstar" The Tornadoes
With the sound effects at the beginning and the clavioline, Joe Meek's masterpiece in weird ways anticipates a lot of art rock. When you get over the tone-poem evocations of Sputnik, it's a lovely piece of music;

and is that autoharp on the B part?

"You've Really Got a Hold on Me" Smokey Robinson and the Miracles
Smokey Robinson's genius is in top gear on this signature Tamla hit. The dark, bluesy swing, the little breaks with "tighter," the surprise sevenths, all seem to come from an artist who can attempt and pull off anything as if he clearly hears the sound of tomorrow in his head.

"Tonight" Jim Bryant and Marni Nixon, *West Side Story* Original Soundtrack
I include this from the movie as a way of getting around cheating with multiple selections from the 1957 Broadway production of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's brilliant *West Side Story*. Bernstein's bold intervals and modulations are later remnants of an era of more widespread seriousness and training in music—remnants without which I would feel less keen a pang of regret at its passing. When not delivering on requirements for quips and action, Sondheim's lyrics find other little understated ways to shine. I've always liked that before Maria, "The world was just an address/A place for me to live in/No better than all right." Marni Nixon was pretty famous when I was a kid for doing overdub singing for actresses who didn't sing. That's what our forebears had to do before there was Auto-Tune.

"Mr. Syms" John Coltrane
John Coltrane's soprano sax has to be the single most identifiable musical instrument outside of human voices. I want to say it's often a little on top of the note (sharp), but, if so, in a way that's always better than right on the note, never worse (as can certainly be the case, I won't name names). You seem to know it's Coltrane with a very few notes, and not only who it is, but what he's feeling, and that he could impress the hell out of you with technique at any time if the need arises. This incredibly fetching, loopy, slightly middle-eastern-influenced blues is one of my favorite jazz pieces.

"Green Onions" Booker T. and the M.G.s
I note that I've placed more stock than for other years in whether a recording from 1962 sounded modern or not, and so it's not surprising that "Green Onions" receives a place of great honor, being possibly the song that has had the longest continuous record for sounding ultra-cool in any context on earth. Steve Cropper deserves some credit here for judicious guitar off-count chord choices.

"Where Have All the Flowers Gone" The Kingston Trio
By contrast, it's a palpable strain to get my ears not to hear "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" in some state of mental pre-digestion as parody of bleeding-heart folkies. However, the gates of irony do not prevail; I am in fact a bleeding-heart, I like folk music quite a bit, and the music and words are beautiful, touching, and clever in a way for

which I will ultimately cast my lot with the laughed-at if it comes to it. When there's no longer an overarching sadness that too many soldiers are "gone to graveyards," maybe I'll skip back with a light heart and a smirk to reassess.

1963

"Surfin' Bird" The Trashmen
1963 led up to a cultural and artistic earthquake, the initial shock of which would occur on November 22nd: JFK was assassinated, and, with no like attention, *With the Beatles* was released in England—no like attention, that is, for the short time it took to tart it into *Meet the Beatles* for American release. If these events changed a cultural course, what was that course? No doubt a civil rights push was favored among forward-thinking people anyway. Musical trendwise, jazz could be said to already be flaming out as a leading-edge music after free jazz, and R&B was ascending without obvious need for England's help. Really what the Beatles did was keep *rock and roll* going, and they did it by pulling highbrow and popular culture onto the same plane. They helped make it possible for civil rights to be agile, a rising star, where in some ways civil rights action was shackled in the hands of even the best of presidents, like Kennedy, to the slow realm of statesmanly gestures such as the Vietnam War as a bulwark against oppressive ideologies. Soon after the Beatles, there could be Dylan going electric, and Tom Wolfe relating to the pump house gang. Extrapolating further, "Surfin' Bird"—although unquestionably noteworthy at the time for being one of the most maniacally entertaining pieces of recorded music ever—could end up being right at home in highbrow salon environments such as the soundtrack to *Full Metal Jacket*.

"All My Loving" The Beatles
The early Beatles gave some impression of being mostly John's thing, but for just enough Paul bull's-eyes to make it a contest; in that view, this was the big Paul moment par excellence in the days of the conquest of America. The lyrics, "Close your eyes and I'll kiss you/ Tomorrow I'll miss you/Remember, I'll always be true/And then while I'm away/I'll write home every day/And I'll send all my loving to you" (that's 90% of them), are so sub-Hallmark in their doggerel simplicity that one begins to respect them as a killing machine. That's not any old cheap romance for teenage girls, that's the maximum possible deployment of it in so many rhyming words that could ever be computed using a UNIVAC II—and then decorated with beautiful melodic arcs and magic surprise minor chords. The way I imagine it, John would have had some trouble singing "All My Loving"; what the two principals jointly needed was the reality: John and Paul conspiring for John to be John, the rocker, and Paul to be Paul, the heartthrob. John was a victory for Paul, and Paul was a victory for John.

"Pipeline" The Chantays
California contributed an interesting hobbyist mythology of reckless thrill-seeking to the sixties, where art served the holy rituals of surfing and hot-rodding, in the form of surf-guitar bands ("Pipeline" was a wonderful little epitome, much covered) and illustrators the likes of

Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. Considering what a fabulous and pervasive industry this was in its day, it's more than curious, really, that forty years of simmering finally renders it all down to the Brian Wilson of "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times."

"Be My Baby" The Ronettes

"Be My Baby" wasn't just the perfection of Phil Spector's "wall of sound" (an object of the aforementioned Mr. Wilson's obsession), it was a masterful melding of Tin Pan Alley musical vocabulary, doo-wop atmospheric grandeur, and a canny lyrical ramping up of desire's intensity by focusing on *how good it will all look to our peers:* "I'll make you so proud of me/We'll make them turn their heads every place we go."

"Anji" Davey Graham

Also known as "Davy Graham," the composer of the song also known as "Angi" was an innovative and at times very popular English folk guitarist, somewhat analogous to America's John Fahey. This acoustic instrumental gets stuck right in anyone's head, and it achieved worldwide prominence when Simon and Garfunkel put a version of it on *Sounds of Silence*.

"Duet Solo Dancers" Charles Mingus

Jazz was in the throes of something in the early sixties—maybe not death, but a crisis of where the important people wanted to take things. Certainly Ornette Coleman, the Miles culminating in *Bitches Brew,* and the Mingus of *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* are iconoclastic, but in different ways—to the point of starting to operate in different dimensions of communication. Too conventionally precise to be called a monstrosity, *Black Saint* nevertheless has a grotesque and ironic quality that perhaps leads more significantly to worlds like that of Carla Bley than to, say, *A Love Supreme.* Ostensibly a ballet, its "Duet Solo Dancers" section begins with luscious Guy-Lombardo-by-way-of-Duke-Ellington amorousness, which takes disturbingly theatrical turns for the dark and sinister, sometimes involving rather amazing muted-trombone approximations of the human voice.

"Louie Louie" The Kingsmen

A great keyboard hook and chorus battle a vocal that in its ineptitude arrives at the perfect signifier for partying down. There's a temptation to place this higher, but fifty million *Animal House* fans can't be right.

"When the Springtime Comes Again" John Fahey

Here is some of the most amazing solo finger-picking guitar there has ever been, rooted in an intense and protective love for the American folk blues tradition (Fahey was working on a master's thesis on Charlie Patton, as well as a project to play and record Patton's entire catalog).

“Ring of Fire” Johnny Cash
As universally infectious as it is peculiar, the mariachi-inflected “Ring of Fire” is a little off the beaten path for Johnny Cash, who was well on the way from “Folsom Prison Blues” to prime time variety show cowboyhood, but it is one of the major milestones. There are those verses which I think are in, what, 11/4? and then there is the terrifying characterization of falling in love as, “Love is a burning thing/And it makes a fiery ring/Bound by wild desire/I fell into a ring of fire.” Then I’ve got that picture of him flipping the camera off right back in my head.

“It Was a Very Good Year” Brown and Dana
Just when I would have been getting ready to proclaim that no one really sounds like this anymore, there have appeared some artists who do, like Shearwater—a quiet, resonant, gypsy quality to the singing. The lyrics manage an ominous vibe, but listen closely, and this is a cheesy equating of an older man’s lady loves to wines of different vintage; suffice it to say that William Shatner covered this song back when that really meant something. I believe Frank Sinatra had a hit with this slightly later than ’63, but Brown and Dana’s is the version I remember from my dad’s record collection, and it has enough genuinely rewarding musical moments to rate—for instance, the vocal harmonies over the chord changes through “We rode in limousines/ Their chauffeurs would drive/When I was 35.”

“I Wanna Be Your Man” The Rolling Stones
Lennon and McCartney were supposedly pleased with themselves for hawking this Ringo-sung number to the Stones, but it’s the Stones who come out ahead. They wake this borderline throwaway up to unignorability with the sheer ferociousness of their result. Mick and Keith sound just plain dangerous; this is the Mick who when you heckled him to get a haircut, shot back, “What, and look like you?”

“Da Doo Ron Ron” The Crystals
This is my personal favorite Phil Spector—especially those stunning Hal Blaine rim-shot snare buildups and the bari sax solo. This is really the Bruce Springsteen–begetting Phil, as opposed to the Brian Wilson–begetting Phil.

“In My Room” The Beach Boys
In the two words “secrets to,” you can hear the musical power Brian is going to wield. But there’s plenty more; one of the most lyrically forthright and sonically luscious recordings to be found, the Boys leave no doubt they will easily transcend novelty status. The whole passage through “Lie awake and pray/Do my crying and my sighing/ Laugh at yesterday” is packed with brilliant elements.

"Mrs. McGrath" The Womenfolk
Bona fide folk-boomers, the Womenfolk had their brush with stardom and were RCA recording artists for some time. This live recording is engaging from the moment the song is cheekily introduced as "an old Irish maiming ballad," and when those five-part harmonies kick in, it's rapturous. There is something inarguably special about singers who have actually developed real-time harmonizing skill—and no doubt something uniquely special about these particular performers—with literally nothing that sounds this good today to take its place.

"Guantanamera" The Weavers
This is the Weavers' Carnegie Hall reunion concert rendition of this remarkably beautiful melody—Wikipedia credits Joseito Fernandez in 1929—harmonized to perfection, and with a talking part where Pete Seeger translates Cuban poet hero José Martí's lyrics, pulled off pretty admirably. Today's listeners would probably rather I didn't mention that "guajira Guantanamera" means "peasant girl from Guantánamo."

"Cast Your Fate to the Wind" Vince Guaraldi
Apparently something of an afterthought, this enchanting Latin jazz original became a huge hit. Of course you all know this is the person who wrote the sublime *Charlie Brown Christmas* music.

"Blowin' in the Wind" Bob Dylan
Odd how monumental this is; it's both still experiencing growing pains lyrically, and still in need of a little sprucing up arrangementwise by the Peters, Pauls, and Marys of the world to determine the ideal viewing angle. Yet, "How many deaths does it take till he knows/That too many people have died/The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind" does just exactly what folk music had been striving to do. And for anyone who wants the answer that's blowing in the wind spelled out with a little less polite diffidence, there's "Masters of War."

"On Broadway" The Drifters
The eternal perfection of "On Broadway's" melody is evident in how many melodies want to come close; Elvis Costello alone gives the neighborhood respectable foot traffic. "Downtown" owes a debt. I can think of a couple of my own songs that want to do one of its steps. The idea that there is one culture world in a physical city and, occupying the exact same location, a second culture world deprived of the first's privilege, is extremely incisive, and is even rendered somewhat painlessly—we the privileged smile along to a rags-to-riches story that hasn't happened yet, but not before we've been reminded that "When you're walking down that street/And you ain't had enough to eat/The glitter rubs right off and you're nowhere."

"Afro Blue" John Coltrane
One of my favorite Coltrane pieces, this is a live recording, and the only release of it, as far as I'm aware. Besides having a moody yet

infectiously hummable theme, it's interesting in the way it transitions from the theme to the soloing in sort of a gradual way—and the soloing is a first-class Tyner and Jones night out, too.

"I Want to Hold Your Hand" The Beatles

"I Want to Hold Your Hand" was another simplistic romantic sentiment, but somehow more John. Paul saying "I want to hold your hand" would have been cloying, but with John, even in this moment of targeted mass teen appeal, there's an overtone of cutting through to the core of something. That is, you *need* to be at least kissing to get the attention of the pop audience of the day, right? But there's a higher thrill in the realm of falling in love at the level of holding hands, and they tune a very powerful musical engine for that. The verse chords under "I think you'll understand" are great enough, but "It's such a feeling that, my love, I can't hide" takes off like a rocket. There is kissing and there is making love in songs today, and there will be tomorrow; the Beatles walk away from this encounter *owning* the very *principle* of holding hands.

1964

"I'm Into Something Good" Herman's Hermits
If you ever get your wish to magically travel time, the great thing about choosing to be popped into 1964 is that you won't feel compelled to cart yourself to Gettysburg or Bethlehem or Yankee Stadium, you just want to be in front of any TV when the Beatles go on *Ed Sullivan*—be in a room with a few of those clean-cut teens going nuts. Or just walk the streets and go to department stores. Any *nothing* record release has a sporting chance of being as fresh and likable as this bouncy Carole King/Gerry Goffin champ. Big pop culture fun, 1964—for about half a day until you notice everything is incredibly racist and there's no place to get away from everyone smoking.

"Secret Agent Man" Johnny Rivers
I think I'm hearing people there in the studio whose job it is to make excited, partying noises. If so, not needed, dear music professionals. The James Bond spy-music tritone workout is varied spectacularly into a killer guitar riff, and with Mr. Rivers's AM D.J.–like delivery of "There's a man who lives a life of danger," let the juvenile kicks begin.

"You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" The Righteous Brothers
There's a deserted-ballroom pathos to Bill Medley's almost weirdly deep voice and Phil Spector's cavernous production—probably his most important—that sets it apart from any average commiserating breakup song. As a kid, I didn't quite feel I had *permission* to plug into those feelings; ultimately I figured out it's relatively moving.

"The Crying Game" Dave Berry
Boy George's version of this is just fine; I say that because if you try to get this on iTunes, as it currently stands, you'll only be able to get a re-recorded version that, well, you should make sure you're okay with by trying out the little audition clip. But it seems like Geoff Stephens's gaudy yet ultimately inspired melodic shifts definitely belong somewhere on the radar.

"Goin' Out of My Head" Little Anthony and the Imperials
The pinnacle of easy listening sophistication, "Goin' Out of My Head" overlays the ostensible mania of the lyric with so many just-clever-enough arrangement touches that
it comes out unrecognizable as anything but the most elegant of excuses to linger for another gin and tonic in the rotating bar at the Top of the Mark.

"House of the Rising Sun" The Animals
Preferably ripped from an original 45 with some wear on it, here is a

record ripped from a 45-year-old frame of mind, with some wear on it. The Animals' modernized electric guitar and organ version of a much-recorded U.S. folk ballad worked the fading concept of it being possible to get drawn into a life wild enough to entail "ruin" in the sense of moral disrepute. Eric Burdon was an interesting guy; I've always wanted to know the story behind the progression (of other moral-conundrum rock?) from "Sky Pilot" to "Spill the Wine" and the band War.

"Let Me Get Close to You" Skeeter Davis
In 1984, my band had managed to talk Alex Chilton into working up a set of his own material, for which we'd open a show in Memphis on our first tour. I was thrilled at this prospect, and as we walked into the Antenna Club during the sound check of Alex Chilton and the Machiavelles (!), this was the song they were doing. With that recommendation, I had to seek out Skeeter's original, which is a sweet, charmingly plain country pop nugget with a grabber of a one-line chorus, and a mysterious emotional lure to it.

"Where Did Our Love Go" The Supremes
The three little descending half-steps going to the minor on "please don't leave me" are one of 1964's several landmark musical phrases. Interesting how no one thought so at the time; the Supremes apparently fought Holland/Dozier/Holland hard to keep from being forced to sing what they felt was a piece of fluff. Diana Ross's vocal does make the project, and let's of course salute the cracked brilliance of the glockenspiel and stomping feet production.

"Time Is on My Side" The Rolling Stones
I knew this as the first song on *Hot Rocks,* so for that reason it got a lot of air time in my life. The rhythm section is surprisingly not there, but the blues guitar soloing is very decent, and the outstanding point to note here is Jagger delivering possibly the most convincing talk-singing middle eight ever.

"Gloria" Them
When a band needs a song to play and there's no time to learn it, "Gloria" always comes to mind. It's a sturdy little composition and inaugurated a long period of Van Morrison's remarkable ability to command mainstream success.

"Baby I Need Your Loving" The Four Tops
For the oo-oo run alone, this deserves quite a bit of praise; ditto for the way the verse modulates up to the line "Baby, I need your loving" before the chorus proper: what a great idea. I would have tried to talk them out of that operatic backing vocal you really hear on "need," technically impressive though it be; it's too much evening dress.

“Oh, Pretty Woman” Roy Orbison
Like so many 1964 events, that guitar that just keeps climbing the ladder of thirds strikes me as vastly influential. My hands just want to do that when I play, and I think this song started the impulse. I suspect it greatly influenced Paul and George. Roy’s vocals have an otherworldly beauty, but are just playful enough, with the growl and all, to stay one-of-us. That snare-on-one part at the end where She comes walking back gives me a thrill to this day.

“A Summer Song” Chad and Jeremy
The soft-rock return of the 2000s really only underscores how far gone is the possibility of another “Summer Song.” The current aesthetic tracks back to 1970 in general, and a little further in the case of post-surf Beach Boys, but today’s ears wouldn’t know how to take something quite this sing-songy—which I can’t help but think is a loss worth grieving. “Wish you didn’t have to go, no no no no,” with the little horn tag, is lovely in a way that is untranslatable to the Arcade Fire universe; maybe Belle and Sebastian carry the torch for some fractional part—at the cost of a “twee if you like twee” qualification.

“The Shoop Shoop Song (It’s in His Kiss)” Betty Everett
I don’t know anything about the producer or the band, but jeez, they are hot, and tight; nearly Tito Puente–worthy. Betty’s singing is incredible, too—expressive, yet 100% melodic and pitch-perfect. One of the punchiest and most satisfying teen romance singles ever.

“The Times They Are A-Changin’” Bob Dylan
It’s a simple folk number—Bob wasn’t straying far from Woody Guthrie in these days—but he’s starting to vary the chords just enough that you can hear phantom musical emotion welling up in the transitions. He’s galloping a little ahead of himself in the somewhat ungainly lyrics. The admonition to get ready and get out of the way is really an idle threat that doesn’t even adequately recommend a way to capitulate to it—but it probably let some people indifferent to the oppression of the draft and of social prejudices know that indifference was going away as an option.

“My Girl” The Temptations
This Smokey Robinson gem was written for new singer David Ruffin, rocketing the already ascendant Temptations to lasting stardom. Slightly corny around “I’ve got so much honey the bees envy me,” the chorus of “I guess you say/What could make me feel this way?” is a timeless classic.

“The Pink Panther Theme” Henry Mancini
Spy-music-mania continues with one of the most memorable jazz—almost big band—runs ever. It was a joy to be forced to play this in junior high stage band, when not much else was.

“Don’t Worry Baby” The Beach Boys
Ah, that feeling when you’ve bragged about how fast your car is, and someone’s called you on it, and now you have to race in the street tomorrow. You’re tense, but you can’t back down. Thankfully, a whisper from your girl relaxes you into doing it right. There’s such a slow shaking of the head to be done in response to this kind of early, completely gorgeous Beach Boys music, wrought in the solemn service of dubiously authentic teen culture ceremony. “She makes me come alive”; oh, yes, and that’s because “She makes me want to drive.”

“Downtown” Petula Clark
Support for this song seems to have eroded since the day, but I won’t budge. Trying to shake off depression by going somewhere crowded and stimulating can be a bit desperate and uncertain to help, but it’s better than nothing. The give-it-a-shot enthusiasm of tarting up dubious sounding diversions with a full orchestra arrangement and one of the century’s canonical lead sheets is a fine enough New Deal strategy for me.

“She’s Not There” The Zombies
Colin Blunstone could be the most generally underappreciated singer among singers that all other singers know is great. There’s some sort of cool breathiness that still achieves complete control of the envelope. And when I get going on playing a keyboard part myself to the point where it’s no longer quite completely frail, Rod Argent is typically the person my hands feel like they’re striving to imitate. Everyone knows “She’s Not There” is a classic; nowadays *Odessey and Oracle* is catching up.

“You Really Got Me” The Kinks
The first time I was intensely in love, I woke up with this song in my head, and it was all clear.

“If I Fell” The Beatles
At the start of 1964, Lennon was on fire. A young lion of a leader, he had pushed pins in the war room and triumphed utterly. By the end of the year, it was somewhat beaten out of him, and coping strategies—no whit less conducive to creativity—would take over in 1965. “If I Fell” remains heart-melting throughout its charting of a fearless, ruthlessly original musical course. How about beginning with the unrepeated “verse” (in the 1910 sense) which ramps to the drum intro with, “And I found that love was more than just holding hands”? What key is that even in? How does he make that transition work? The lyrics are not absolutely top drawer, but they are compelling and special. Significantly, he lets himself be not quite the good guy. “I hope you see that I would love to love you/And that she will cry when she learns we are two.” Woah. He’s going to dump his girl for “you,” and he wants to make sure your commitment is worth the devastation

to be inflicted on her. That's a lot of awareness; and he's not holding himself up as admirable. The music feeds an incredible, aching sweetness to this moment; the modulation up to "I couldn't stand the pain" is another mind-blowing shift, which resolves just as miraculously. The final slightly hackneyed ascent only reminds you that you're coming down to earth after an amazing flight.

1965

"I Ain't Marching Anymore" Phil Ochs
1965 was an explosive and crucial year—really the first year that felt like the sixties as they would later be remembered. Besides being year two Anno Beatles, it was a big year for R&B, and also the year "protest songs" started to capture mainstream attention—the object of protest being the Vietnam War, for which the U.S. imposed a military draft. Phil Ochs's reminiscences of the country's wars from the point of view of the young men sent to fight them was focused artfully on an injustice that by the decade's end would bring the country within sight of some sort of intergenerational revolution.

"Yesterday" The Beatles
"Yesterday" was a huge musical turning point. It achieved widespread over-30 credibility for the Beatles, which in turn elevated them from an oversized fad to a force capable of changing culture in general. It surely put cold steel in Paul McCartney's hand, probably in a way that exaggerated Lennon's counterculture, minority-politics role thereafter. It's a sublime composition—worthiest of standards. It skirts sentimentality as the verse begins, but then corners to the dry and believable. "I believe in yesterday" is one of the most powerful lyric lines ever. It goes well beyond a desire to live in the past (as would be Lennon's accusation); this is the confession of someone so shattered as to be looking for ways that the passage of time isn't all there is.

"Eve of Destruction" Barry McGuire
McGuire left the New Christy Minstrels to pursue edgier territory, and got a number-one hit immediately with 19-year-old P.F. Sloan's tuneful prophecy of nuclear war. It became a lightning rod for conservative condemnation of troublemaking youth—famous enough for the Beatles to goof on Barry's gruff delivery with "look at all those bodies floatin' in the River Jordan" on their 1965 Christmas fan club disk.

"It Ain't Me Babe" The Turtles
To some extent, this is a way of cooking my books to get more Dylan numbers in, but the Turtles—whose members included Flo and Eddie, later of Zappa's inner circle—contribute an L.A. snottiness that makes for a respectable hook above and beyond what Dylan supplied.

"Never to Be Forgotten" The Bobby Fuller Four
This pre–"I Fought the Law" Mustang single sparkles with the energy unique to young sixties guitar bands who feel they have a hit. Winningly Texas DIY with its crappy production, rang-a-dang-dang guitar, and Hollyesque harmonies, it's always a joy to listen to. The verse modulates up to a higher-energy B part, then, when it seems like

there's no place left to escalate, to an even more climactic chorus.

"Tired of Waiting for You" The Kinks
The Kinks would put out stunning toned-down material like this throughout the
sixties, inexplicably fading steadily from popular interest. Fortunately "Lola" changed that in 1970.

"A Love Supreme Pt. II—Resolution" John Coltrane
McCoy Tyner's mind-blowing piano solo is something for the ages. It's a wonder of both gymnastics and invention—one of those passages that make you realize no one may ever play anything this well again: there just isn't the same incentive to produce such an incredible real-time result. People with this much vision will gravitate to available shortcuts like fudging the hard parts on computer, but it will never have the same heart. Elvin Jones's drumming is marvelously complex, and of course there's Mr. Coltrane on this rambunctious second stop on his musical search for the love supreme that was the Lord's.

"My Generation" The Who
The combination of blistering talent and cheapo but high-octane production yields this one-of-a-kind Who landmark. This is some of the busiest drumming and bass playing ever that still hold it together. Mr. Townshend has been needled for the indelible "Hope I die before I get old," but as I see it, that was to some degree a characterization of even younger kids—teenagers; I mean, the stutter?

"Death Letter" Son House
From a session following his 1960s rediscovery, "Death Letter" is as real and chilling as a piece of songwriting has ever gotten, yet has an uncharacteristically open humanity to it. When the average idiot rocker decides to write about death, you can look forward to a vigorous workout of Halloweeny alienation; when this gentleman does it, it's to help you to love someone the way you will know you should have when that person is gone.

"What Do You Want from Me" *Man of La Mancha* Original Cast Recording
The operatic vocal style and the project's most maudlin moments, like "The Impossible Dream," shouldn't eclipse the brilliant songwriting that bubbles up throughout this musical re-imagining of Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* the most beautiful—and that's saying something—being this song. Cervantes played Don Quixote as almost a straight fool, whereas *Man of La Mancha* focuses on how Sancho Panza and especially Aldonza respond to the nobility of his struggle. "Why don't you know that you're laughed at wherever you go?/But I can't laugh with the rest, and why, I don't know."

“Girl Don’t Tell Me” The Beach Boys
One of the few Beach Boys moments that sound like reactions to the Beatles, “Girl Don’t Tell Me” foreshadows, more than anything, the Beach Boys’ ability to rise to the Beatles’ challenge of eclecticism as well as anyone. Carl does a nice job with the lead vocal; “Those shorts, mm, they sure fit you fine” always makes me laugh.

“Think for Yourself” The Beatles
The rule here is that John, George, and Paul are each eligible for one song for a single year in the Beatles era if more than one of them have one of the best of the year. Jim Shapiro had a theory that the Beatles’ peculiar style of adventurousness with chord changes begins here, and he has a point. Just the line “The ruins of the life that you had in mind” contains tightly packed genius; the T.S. Eliot casual of the lyric, the fuzz guitar mirror of the bass line, the groundbreaking changes on both the first downbeat and at “you,” and the little run-on to get to the accented syllable of “had in mind”—it seems like a lot of artists subtly picked up on any number of those details.

“In the Midnight Hour” Wilson Pickett
When you think about it, there’s an intriguing poetry to “I’m going to wait till the midnight hour/That’s when my love comes tumbling down.” At any rate, a great song that I’m sure everyone reading this knows backwards and forwards; my favorite part is the positively delicious sax solo—is that baritone?

“King of the Road” Roger Miller
The easy country blues melody is just dynamic enough to arrive at some otherworldly perfection. I’m sure after the very first time I heard it, I would remember it note for note for the rest of my life, even if I never heard it again. I’ve never heard anything quite like the lyric either; there have been vaudeville numbers about funny bums, but this is something else—a jovial enough but much more frank and detailed portrait of a homeless person with a system of rides, flops, and no-questions-asked employment.

“Tracks of My Tears” Smokey Robinson and the Miracles
The best vocal performance of the year is one of the great Smokey Robinson’s best compositions—a precursor to “Tears of a Clown,” but even better.

“Mr. Tambourine Man” The Byrds
More bonus Dylan! Bob apparently never cared for this kind of sweetened treatment—the meaning seems subtly changed to erase the cautionary tone associated with following the tambourine man—but the dreamy harmonies and Rickenbacker 12-string constituted the first full-blown sixties sound, too important an event to brook quibbling.

"Linus and Lucy" Vince Guaraldi
Now going from milestone to milestone, we arrive at a recording that may well have backed into the position of the world's most famous jazz recording. The origin of course was the incandescent Schulz/Mendelson/Melendez *Charlie Brown Christmas,* in which the piece represented the shallow diversion of the kids Charlie wants to buckle down for a serious Christmas play. From the pop perfection of the theme to the two jazzy digressions, it's a triumph, beating Guaraldi's own "Cast Your Fate to the Wind" at its own game.

"(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" The Rolling Stones
The relatively dark libido of "Satisfaction" had a bruising impact on American radio, starting the silly but pervasive casting of the Stones as the "Dionysian" counterpart to the Beatles' "Apollonian" archetype. I couldn't be bothered with any of that, but the way the unlikely bass, drum, and tambourine parts combine to a particularly low and lean rhythm is something I'd accept as a schooling.

"Like a Rolling Stone" Bob Dylan
Backed by the musicianly Americana of Mike Bloomfield and Al Kooper, Dylan scorches the earth with the last member of the bourgeois who will ever be allowed a modest degree of self-satisfaction. Although I don't understand the details, I've always been knocked out by, "You used to be so amused/By Napoleon in rags and the language that he used/Go to him now, he calls you, and you can't refuse." There is a fine line of economic security separating bemusement from practical enslavement. The subtext is that until the lives of the underprivileged are righted, the lives of the privileged have false meaning—a very heavy gauntlet to throw down.

"Help!" The Beatles
A fantastic sounding recording from the first note, "Help!" is the first important step toward the realism of the mature John Lennon. He was writing a song about John the person needing the help he really needed. Like a lot of the album *Help!,* it's got nice little allocations of fancy drumming, guitar playing, and singing. The way the chorus winds up through "And I do appreciate you being 'round," etc., to the final "won't you please" is spine-tingling. What a treat to hear those men sing together.

"The Sounds of Silence" Simon and Garfunkel
I want to learn more about Tom Wilson. He was a producer who didn't have that many projects, but three of them were: *The Velvet Underground and Nico, Highway 61 Revisited,* and the incredible audacity of tacking the electric band onto "Sounds of Silence" without the artist's consent. I get the idea he was considered a bit of an oddball, but he was obviously someone worth studying more than actually happens. "The Sounds of Silence" is the culmination of the folk movement; after it, nothing more really needed to be done.

Successfully electrified after initially existing as an acoustic duet, it stands with the most magical melodies of the most magical era for melodies, and with perhaps not the very best lyrics, Art and Paul, especially Art, harmonize their way to the loftiest place. I'm tempted to rule Paul Simon underqualified to deal in big pronouncements, until I actually check his work. "The sign said the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls" is about as overblown as any lyric can get, except that the words of the prophets really are the lost cries of the marginalized, and the whole civil rights movement of the sixties depended on putting that fact across.

1966

"Batman Theme" Neal Hefti
The first song on these collections will always be intended to speak the authentic feeling of the time—and also suggest a party I think I'd want to join at any point in my life. A representative truth known to the people of 1966 but since lost: the *real* Batman has nothing to do with brooding introspection, it has to do with cheap fun. This gem of a theme song perfectly mirrors the genius pop art visuals of the TV show and the era with its half-steps and second-interval harmonies. My CD edits and compresses the Neal Hefti album version to emulate the sound and length of the TV theme.

"Paperback Writer" The Beatles
By 1966, the Beatles' influence is enormous; jazz, folk, and blues as we knew them are virtually obliterated—one could almost say loved to death—by them. As noted earlier, such is the Beatles' magnitude that I won't be repeating artists *except* for the Beatles, in whose case the three main writers are eligible in parallel. "Paperback Writer" was and is impossibly cool sounding—arguably the birth of the hard rock guitar riff.

"Big Spender" *Sweet Charity* Original Cast Recording
I think of this Broadway vamp shtick as the jumping-off point for the whole Bob Fosse world of art-school cabaret choreography, and also an entry in the top ranks of the century's memorable tunes, one that flirts confidently with dissonance.

"Solitary Man" Neil Diamond
This very demanding rhyme scheme is a risk to come off sing-songy, but in Neil Diamond's hands its effortless world-weariness is all payoff. "Don't know that I will, but until I can find me/A girl who'll stay and won't play games behind me"—that's "will" rhyming with "until," "stay" rhyming with "play," and "find me" rhyming with "behind me." Try composing one line like that if it you think it's easy. The stand-up bass is a beautiful touch.

"Wild Thing" The Troggs
Who ever gets tired of "Wild Thing," the first and best garage rock tune? I don't mean to claim to know who pioneered the style, I mean to offer personal testimony that when I first became aware there was such a concept as "garage band," the concept involved doing "Wild Thing." "Wild Thing" distills teenage kicks to such a perfect primal essence (a straight love song to a girl called only "Wild Thing" is rather nervy when you think about it) as to do a bit of injustice to the Troggs, who actually had some range: "With a Girl Like You" and "Love Is All Around" were almost equally great bubblegum hits.

“Big Fat Silver Aeroplane” Roy Harper
Not many worthwhile obscurities from 1966 have escaped exploration, but for how strangely pretty it is, not many people know this one. Roy Harper is an obsessively anti-Christian British eccentric, something of a prototype for Julian Cope. His immense catalog contains the occasional stunner, this being the earliest. These ranting, surrealistic lyrics about hating everyone on an airplane for no good reason more or less paint the Roy picture.

“Shapes of Things” The Yardbirds
This dark military-march premonition is the signature Jeff Beck Yardbirds cut, introducing some of the earliest Eastern-edge guitar work I think of as psychedelic.

“For Emily, Wherever I May Find Her” Simon and Garfunkel
Paul Simon was the brains, but what any given Simon and Garfunkel album needed was always less Simon, more Garfunkel. Anything you could hear Art Garfunkel fairly well on would tend to be exceptionally beautiful, like this. “Frosted fields of juniper and lamplight” is an incredibly tight evocation of the luminosity of everyday experience.

“Summer in the City” The Lovin’ Spoonful
Terrific production touches—I want to say slightly mambo-influenced. The tension released when the hot day ends and “at night it’s a different world” has real power, as for some reason does the way “in the summer, in the city, in the summer, in the city” repeats.

“Remember You” The Zombies
Here’s another obscure one, although with the number of Zombies obsessives growing all the time, probably not for long. The breathy perfection of Colin Blunstone’s singing and Rod Argent’s scalding piano are, as usual, the focal points of what is actually a Chris White number.

“Georgy Girl” The New Seekers
My impression is that this is a wholly critically dismissed song, or at least type of song, and I’d like to go on record as committing unreservedly to its quality. This is light entertainment, but its energy and centeredness succeed in demanding of me that an introverted person in need of coaxing to blossom a little be taken seriously alongside those concerning themselves with drugs, doom, war.

“Walk Away Renee” The Left Banke
Adolescent longing rendered with amazing vividness via harpsichord, flute, and string quartet; it’s not obvious why all hipsters tend to be okay with the Left Banke, but good for them.

"Making Time" The Creation
Here's one of my favorite high-volume listening experiences. Probably obscure enough that most of you haven't heard it, and you must. It's like the Who with everything up two notches, and when that bowed-string guitar solo hits, the brain cells start perishing.

"Good Vibrations" The Beach Boys
Giving the Beach Boys two cuts here violates rules I've set for myself, but I'm not going to be the one making a 1966 list and leaving out the original teenage symphony to God. But—and I've been dying to say this for years—those tape edits of legend are some of the least seamless splices I've ever heard on a major release!

"Season of the Witch" Donovan
I'm arranging the songs in ascending quality order; I loved radio countdowns as a kid. The last ten songs will usually be in strict order, with the best last; earlier, the rule is relaxed for the sake of listenability. About here they start to each be a little cut above the previous one. Donovan was fabulously successful but critically slighted—unjustly. Steve Wynn converted me to the greatness of this song, which it's easy to imagine was crucial to, say, the Doors, and to Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth." Winningly proto-Girardian theme, and he projects a bit of a twit vibe on the verses, then nails the choruses to the back wall.

"Hey Joe" Jimi Hendrix
Hendrix's brilliance is all present in this advance single from the mighty *Are You Experienced*. It's as creepy as just about any murder ballad; while Jimi didn't write this, of course, I kind of wish he didn't throw in "shoot her one more time again for me." The compelling moment for me is the half-step ascent riff introduced in the middle.

"(I'm Not Your) Stepping Stone" The Monkees
Fortunately the world has mostly forgotten how reviled the Monkees once were for being cast for a TV show about a rock band, but when your track can follow Hendrix and sound bigger, I'd say you get to be in the real band club. Mickey Dolenz was among the best rock vocalists, and how about Peter Tork freakin' *giving it up* in the right speaker? (Choosing this over the almost-as-good "I'm a Believer" avoids Neil Diamond duplication and highlights the outstanding Boyce and Hart.)

"Visions of Johanna" Bob Dylan
I was too young to get *Blonde on Blonde* when it came out; this was the first cut where, later, in my teens, I received something like the mature impact, a sense of being in the presence of the genuinely prophetic. For the record, it was the "He writes 'everything's been

returned which was owed'" sequence (that made my *conscience explode)*.

"God Only Knows" The Beach Boys

Everyone ought to know that this is a recurring candidate for most beautiful pop song ever. It will always be slightly weird to me that Brian Wilson didn't write the lyrics to these quintessentially Brian Wilson songs, yet they're still him—no doubt in about the same way that it's weird how Shakespeare never composed an original story line.

"Eight Miles High" The Byrds

"Eight Miles High" has some of the most memorable sheer sonics of any pop recording. The harmonies are as angelic as in '65, but with a certain telemetric aridity to the counterpoint and ripping sevenths. And that guitar; it's clearly influenced by jazz, but what jazz? Coltrane? Ornette Coleman? Slightly Wes Montgomery if you want to pick a guitarist? From my perspective it was as formative for something like fusion as it was derivative of anything before it.

"Ruby Tuesday" The Rolling Stones

Even when they seem for all appearances to be attempting a minuet, they sound like louts. The Rolling Stones are practically unique in their ability to be utterly appealing in that kind of situation. "Ruby Tuesday" is so gorgeous its status has never threatened to dip below classic, but it's in a category of mid-sixties material like "Back Street Girl" or "2000 Man" that was once taken for lack of focus but now reads as unexpected consistency of quality across a curious range of styles and moods.

"And Your Bird Can Sing" The Beatles

On top of all that glorious 1966ness, there's John Lennon. It took me a long time to realize how intensely I love this song (and it certainly hurts to choose anything over "Tomorrow Never Knows" and "She Said She Said"). It's one Lennon used to dismiss, as if the words are throwaway—they're not—and the craft is hollow. But it's not for him to realize that if achievements like these spine-tingling harmony guitar cascades don't issue from the clock-punching labor of a reigning musical genius, there is no wishing them into being with all one's idealistic might. And no one else would ever get to the lines "You may be awoken; I'll be round." Others would know it was important for you to be awoken, but not that it was key for them to be around.

1967

"I See the Rain" The Marmalade
Probably like a lot of people, I didn't know this one until the U.K. *Nuggets,* and the social resonance of it for me is that it was one of those songs Michael Quercio, Susanna Hoffs, and the early eighties L.A. people cherished—in relative isolation. She and Matthew Sweet did a good cover of it recently, and it was in, I believe, a Volkswagen commercial! The year 1967 is probably tied with 1977 for the very year itself bearing the most indelible cultural stamp, and the salient utilitarian character of the Summer of Love CD is, surprisingly, its kid-appropriateness (I have 5- and 2-year-old girls). There's a convenient overlap between the work of raving acid-heads and that of Julie Aigner-Clark where you get songs about cows running in from the rain to put their coats on. Set in this case to the big, big chunks-of-haggis sound of the Marmalade's two-bass-guitar lineup.

"Penny Lane" The Beatles
The cheapest stance among music critics in my lifetime has been that Paul McCartney is a lightweight. Wrong, on so many levels. To start with, Paul is by all indications an actual tough guy and they aren't—if *they* ever have to scratch out a living among thugs and swindlers on the Reeperbahn, I don't want to watch. More importantly, though, the axiom that no one should produce good-time, populist fare seems not only wrong, but a betrayal of rock and roll. For me, "Penny Lane" is a powerful piece of music, the more so for first establishing a tone that's *just* whimsical. At the point of the three snare hits at "very strange," you're reminded this is a band capable of deploying a lot more power, and just that hint is enough to charge the moment with an anything-can-happen resonance.

"To Sir with Love" Lulu
This spot wants a quiet song, and it was among this, "8:05" by Moby Grape, and "Suzanne" by Leonard Cohen. I now appreciate the Cohen song, but all through my youth I considered it dreary, and I want to stay minimally true to that category of impressions. Nothing wrong with the Grape one, maybe not quite a classic. After finally settling on Tim Hardin's "If I Were a Carpenter," I realized I had to have "To Sir with Love," the only song with a chorus catchy enough for Paul McCartney to rip off.

"Sunshine of Your Love" Cream
I relate to Cream more respectfully than affectionately. To this day I look at the cover of *Disraeli Gears* and flash, "oh yeah, one of my older brother's albums," and I don't even have an older brother. As goofy as the cover art wants to be, I can't not think of Mount Rushmore. Besides the famous riff and—excuse me?—"woman tone" guitar solo, the points for me are for the really odd added vocal at "to be where

I'm going," and the slowed down "Apache" drum beat, which I am here to tell you cannot be dropped into just any song. Oh, *this* is engineered by Tom Dowd, so he is represented here.

"If the Night" The Kaleidoscope
This is the David Lindley Kaleidoscope, from a very hard-to-find album called *Side Trips*. I believe you can actually find new vinyl pressings, but if you can't, a substitute fun-with-nihilism number with acetate-shredding vocal harmonies and organ is the Strawberry Alarm Clock's hit "Incense and Peppermints."

"A Whiter Shade of Pale" Procol Harum
This is the first of a class of songs milking a certain British rock cliché that I'm an absolute sucker for: the music hall descent with the twist. This one doesn't have *much* of a twist yet, except for sounding vaguely like Bach's "air on the G string" (not the real title, don't make me Google it) and Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman," which was more or less the descent with *no* twist. Later examples would be "Life on Mars," "Bell Bottom Blues," "All the Young Dudes." At their best, these take a wacky turn at the end that leaves the impression of utter invention.

"San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" Scott McKenzie
You don't want a song like this to be about what coming to Haight-Ashbury was actually like—a decades-long excuse for a lot of people to exercise bad manners—but rather what the song was: a lovely ideal. I'm hippie-dippy enough that any song that can get away with "You're going to meet some gentle people there" is okay with me. There's an arrangement coup I've never heard done quite as well, where coming out of the bridge back to "For those who come," there are some extra chord changes tossed in that wake my ears right up as good drama.

"Wonderful" The Beach Boys
I've formed the possibly wrong impression of this being the most intact as-it-happens artifact from *Smile* among those that mean a lot to me, which lets out "Heroes and Villains," for which I'm not enthusiastic at that level. On balance I probably like the 2004 version even better, but it's so certainly the product of rare musical genius that decisions only Brian could make, like the threadbare accompaniment and whispered vocals, don't seriously threaten to get in the way. I want to take the lyrics as not darkly ironic in some way; with Van Dyke Parks I harbor suspicions.

"Carrie Anne" The Hollies
This one is in some ways *the* benchmark power pop song. It's very simple, for one thing. Anything by the Raspberries is a concerto by comparison; for the first British Invasion bands, the soil hadn't been

farmed to death yet. I mean, the chorus hits, there's a big vocal fourth, right on the downbeat, with the word "hey"! All power pop wants to do this. Then, but for the Hollies having done it first, it wants to say a girl's name. Then, ask her what her game is. And then it could hardly be expected to stop itself from wanting to play.

"Citadel" The Rolling Stones
Andy Partridge picked this in some magazine forum where artists got to choose a favorite Stones song. *Q,* I think. Yeah! I was one of those people who didn't know I was supposed to just not like *Satanic Majesties,* so I kept trying to get it. What was it about, sci-fi adventure? Half the songs are just plain great, and as for the rest, when the mother ship visits and calls select earthlings with some notes from "Gomper," I'll be ready. The two girls' names (Candy and Cathy) were a hypnotic mantra for me, and Keith's guitar at the beginning has such a yummy ground glass crunch.

"Windy" The Association
There *was* a time before the eternal and perfect, "Who's tripping down the streets of the city?"; but it's honestly hard for me to imagine it not existing. Neglected as an artistic achievement, it's one of those I start thinking barely makes the best-of-year list, then I realize I consider bumping other songs, but *never* this one.

"Alone Again Or" Love
The consensus of critics' favorite rock-era albums started taking shape around 1975, and despite not being a big seller, this was one of the usual suspects from the beginning, along with *Astral Weeks, What's Going On, Pet Sounds, Blonde on Blonde.* This elaborate, delicately Latin-influenced production is the stand-out, but not to get to know leader Arthur Lee's songs like "A House Is Not a Motel" would be a shame.

"The Crystal Ship" The Doors
Probably my favorite Doors cut—the prettiest of the full-blown Jim Morrison tracks. I like the Jim Morrison thing. The idea of a room full of people at a rock show finding themselves in a sort of candle-and-incense frame of mind where everyone's just a little more reflective and serious than anyone expected is entirely appealing to me.

"I Never Loved a Man the Way I Love You" Aretha Franklin
Truth be told, I don't like "Respect" all that much. It's a fine vocal performance, but I like almost every other song on the *Never Loved a Man* album better, the title song most of all. In my mind it's the coolest Wurlitzer riff since "What'd I Say," and to have all of Wurly, piano, and organ building the chord definition is bold and well-executed. "My friends keep telling me you're no good/But they don't know that I'd leave you if I could" is terrific enough by itself, but Ms. Franklin makes it absolutely singe.

"Fairest of the Seasons" Nico
Nico's singing is practically undecidable; I…*guess* I like it? Mainly, it's the composition here. As delicious as the Jackson Browne music is, the lyrics are its match or better. The whole sequence of "Now that I'm almost not so very far behind," "Now that I feel it's time to spend the night away," etc., creates quite an incisive little vocabulary, the kicker for me being, "Now that it's real, now that the dreams have given all they have to lend."
For even *suggesting* in popular entertainment that there's something more real than *your dreams,* this deserves the Nobel Prize.

"Waterloo Sunset" The Kinks
Under the radar, a world of hearts has been won in united concern for Terry and Julie not being afraid as they gaze at evening. An emotional couple of seconds to me, don't ask me why, are the guitar whacks just after "Every day I look at the world from my window."

"Somebody to Love" Jefferson Airplane
Worked up the year before, there's at least a sentimental case to be made for the epicenter of psychedelic music being located at San Francisco at the crack of dawn of 1967, with the Jefferson Airplane thumping out this rock-folk monster, and Grace Slick stepping up to the mike with that thousand-yard stare and preaching, "When the truth is found to be lies…"

"Daydream Believer" The Monkees
Here's a mouthful: it's almost as hard to pick only one Monkees tune in 1967 as it is to pick only two Beatles tunes. And to have that pick be a Davy Jones number? The Nesmith-sung "Door into Summer" would be my second choice. And what about "Pleasant Valley Sunday"? It's hard to articulate what is *so* perfect about the chorus of "Daydream Believer." Unlike "Carrie Anne," it's sly; it backs in. "Cheer up, sleepy Jean," the way Davy slams the compressor with it, is certainly a world-class hook by itself, but holds back on a tentative minor chord, then "Oh what can it mean," sidesteps to another minor. At "to a…," there's still a *rest* on the next big downbeat! Only on the last syllable of "daydream" (on a lowly three-count) does it all hit. Masterful deployment.

"Venus in Furs" The Velvet Underground
There was a time when I was the only person I knew who liked this record, then only one of two, then four, and I have lived to see the day when I have to complain that it's overrated. "Run Run Run" is just plain bad, for instance. About half the songs have content so unprofessional sounding as to take some explaining. But everything about "Venus in Furs" is a knockout. Lou's vocals are a tour de force, first for finding the perfectly tuned dramatic delivery of the S&M narration, and second for sheer flourish: check that vibrato on "in the

dark." The ringing guitar and booming toms are just exactly right, and it can't have been easy to play that viola part so precisely through the whole take.

"Lucifer Sam" Pink Floyd
It's mind-boggling enough that Syd Barrett and Roger Waters once co-existed, and even odder that nearly Syd's entire legend rests on the few songs on *Piper at the Gates of Dawn,* about a third of which are borderline throwaways. It's easy to appreciate Syd on the obviously dead-cool "Lucifer Sam," and easy to appreciate Rick Wright's always-showcased echoey, modal keyboards. It's not as easy to notice how good Roger's *bass playing* is, but listen to the run after "always by your side." "See Emily Play" is another, more obvious bass triumph, inaugurating his octave heartbeat style.

"Manic Depression" Jimi Hendrix Experience
This is nearly the fullest sounding hard rock track of the era, and it's just a three-piece. Mitch Mitchell is obviously serious about meeting the challenge, but so much is Hendrix himself that one marvels. When he throws in little leads, those aren't overdubs; he goes back to the rhythm in the intervening microseconds to keep the energy going. One of the two gob-smacking song appearances in the movie *Shampoo* (the other was "Wouldn't It Be Nice").

"A Day in the Life" The Beatles
The mere fact that the Beatles didn't intend *Sergeant Pepper* to be a concept album doesn't mean it isn't. The concept was an inducement of their times and their sensitivities, and it is this: a systematic breakdown of exclusionary principles. I'm in the habit of crediting Allen Ginsberg with pioneering the observation, but it's obvious enough once you think to test it. "Billy Shears" is okay even though he "[goes] in and out of style." As much as the girl in "She's Leaving Home" is the heroine, the feelings of the parents are at least as real and important. The "Sergeant" isn't a reviled authority figure, he's part of the sympathetic community with his lonely hearts club. Same for Rita the meter maid. The singer in "Getting Better" blurts out an admission that he is a reforming wife abuser. It's really so revolutionary the old chemical litmus tests that use us-vs.-them positioning don't pick it up. In a way, the album before "A Day in the Life" is setup, and that song, the delivery system. The album sketches the new post-exclusion world, and "Day in the Life" illustrates how it might *feel* for the old quotidian reality to give way to the new. You read the news as if experiencing, for instance, the weight of tragic loss of life for the first time. It will be a bigger deal than anyone realizes to come up with a better album. It won't happen tomorrow, or the next day.

1968

"Revolution" The Beatles
Here's why you're not John Lennon. If you were going to write "Revolution," you would first *identify your target audience* and then speak to the passions of those people. John comes up with, "You say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all want to change the world"—talking to the left and challenging the left to come up with a more peaceful alternative. If that's not music to either side's ears, he does *not* care. You, one way or the other, would care.

"Paralyzed" The Legendary Stardust Cowboy
The 1968 CD is a little special in that only two songs in, it *will* lose you some friends. But friends who don't appreciate a cowboy at the outer limits of insane screaming accompanied by a banjo and drums that *turn* insane during the song are friends who will always come and go. And if I ask you how you bring such music to a climax, and you answer, "bugle solo," come get a hug.

"Israelites" Desmond Dekker and the Aces
This is certainly the first reggae song I ever heard, and is probably still my favorite, though Augustus Pablo's *King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown* is the record for dub elements. And, you know, I did like "I Can See Clearly Now"; here is a fact that I'm probably the only one on the planet to get excited about: Johnny Nash was the singer on the theme from the cartoon "The Mighty Hercules"! I'm still speechless.

"Good Times, Bad Times" Led Zeppelin
Yes, this one definitely must be ripped from vinyl; the key to the particular power of 1968–69 rock music (and, I bet, muscle cars) is embedded in the way the first two Zeppelin albums behave at saturation levels. If you're a purist, you should really record it with live mikes in front of the speakers of a Zenith console stereo, turned up loud enough that you just barely pick up a little rattle from the glass top of a coffee table.

"The Garden of Earthly Delights" United States of America
Experimental music tends naturally to be steered toward being about alienation. For example, synthesizers were brand new in 1968, so you could tell cutting-edge projects by echoey bleeping sounds such as you expected when the hostile space alien first appeared on screen; that kind of thing didn't go nearly as well with convivial songs as with lyrics like these, which use botanical imagery to convey the poisonousness of the woman the song has in mind. Yet, this is not another friend-loser; this is a surprisingly well-executed piece of musicianship and vocal interpretation—the right people to catch in an art-house frame of mind.

"Astral Weeks" Van Morrison
In my book, the album *Astral Weeks* is a little musically undercomposed to be one of *the* greatest albums as is its reputation, but the title song is both a breathtaking evocation of how spiritual transformation feels, and the world's most beautiful set of lyrics that includes the word "viaduct."

"Dance to the Music" Sly and the Family Stone
As well as being really good, Sly and the Family Stone records were gigantic hits; if you went back in time, you wouldn't actually hear *Astral Weeks* anywhere, but Sly was on
the radio, being interviewed on the *Dick Cavett Show,* getting covered by high school dance bands.

"Hurdy Gurdy Man" Donovan
There's some sort of a creepy edge to "the hurdy gurdy man," when he comes singing songs of love amid the "unenlightened shadows" and that well-known snarling electric guitar, which everyone used to say was Jimmy Page, but I just checked on Wikipedia, and it's apparently really Alan Parker. However, John Paul Jones played bass and was "musical director" (as opposed to lighting director?).

"Piece of My Heart" Big Brother and the Holding Company
This is of course Janis Joplin's first high-profile recording. As much as I love this performance, there is a lot more to like. The hammer-on rhythm guitar in the verses is a hook in itself. And the amazing album art was my first exposure to Robert Crumb.

"Wasn't Born to Follow" The Byrds
It's a hard choice between this and "Draft Morning," and honestly I think this wins just because of the cachet of being so prominently featured in *Easy Rider.* Another illustration of how many fantastic Carole King/Gerry Goffin songs there are floating around in various artists' sixties catalogs.

"I Heard It Through the Grapevine" Marvin Gaye
It's possible I noodle on the riff of this song more than any other when I have a few free moments with a guitar or piano. I've probably been so influenced by Dave Marsh's famous explication of the lyrics that I can no longer call to mind what they did for me personally, although expressing four hundred years of paranoia in order to reclaim the human spirit was not it.

"Beechwood Park" The Zombies
All serious enough rock musicians love *Odessey and Oracle.* When Mitch Easter first played it for me, I told him it was a very good

record for always sounding quite a bit like “Double-Back Alley” by the Rutles. I was *mostly* kidding. “Time of the Season” is also fabulous, but my favorite is “Beechwood Park,” with the perfect and unexpected lines, “And the breeze will touch your hair, kiss your face/And make you care about your world.”

“(Sittin’ On) The Dock of the Bay” Otis Redding
Otis Redding had already died by the time this came out, so it always felt ominous. It’s probably the best expression of that feeling that San Francisco and California are the end of the line for going west in search of success, and for many people are just places to be out of luck. “I can’t do what ten people tell me to do/So I guess I’ll remain the same” always gets me.

“Sympathy for the Devil” The Rolling Stones
The Rolling Stones’ devil is close to Goethe’s Mephistopheles—he wants to make a deal with you by offering worldly advantage to obtain your service in hell—but in some ways he is, as far as I can tell, a real innovation. The Stones’ devil gets your soul when you deny your responsibility for evil in the world: when Pilate “washed his hands and sealed his fate,” or when someone shouts out, “‘Who killed the Kennedys?’/When after all, it was you and me.” It is a seriously impressive literary achievement.

“Lather” Jefferson Airplane
I have similar strong affections for “Lather” and for the movie *Harold and Maude* that I couldn’t easily explain or defend. Both are about young men whose resistance of adulthood is expected to be cheered by the audience, and I’m not in favor of that, but in both cases the project is executed with such flair that I’m swept up. This could be the greatest of many great Grace Slick melodic lines; the turn on what I guess you’d call the chorus—e.g., “sometimes he’s so nameless…”—is astounding.

“Chest Fever” The Band
The singing is a sort of not unappealing drunken shout. I don’t follow what the words are saying other than a girl is inaccessible, and I’m completely stumped as to why it’s called “chest fever” (unless it’s about that kind of chest that gives someone else fever). But how that organ slays me. It would be impossible for me to hear this song start in any situation on earth and not go, “Ooh! Ooh! It’s ‘Chest Fever’!”

“White Room” Cream
This is some of my favorite Eric Clapton guitar playing, but it’s more the Jack Bruce content I’m responding to. And mostly intangibles at that. He has a way with cadence and repetition in building up a concrete feeling of desperation out of Pete Brown’s abstractions. There’s “the station,” and “no strings could secure you,” and “the shadows run from themselves.” You just *know* that someone here had

better decide to face the facts about something.

"America" Simon and Garfunkel
There are times when Paul Simon shouldn't do the beatnik outsider, or should turn the timeless romantic poetry down about two clicks, but here he gets everything right and then some. The melody rises and falls like waves, and the depictions of easygoing exchange between a couple go by with arresting vividness ("toss me a cigarette"). The shift to greater gravity at "Kathy, I'm lost" is brilliant, swelling the final wave until you have Mr. Garfunkel joining on the harmonies of "all come to look for America." It absolutely gives me goose bumps every time.

"Hey Jude" The Beatles
This could be the simplest of the obvious candidates for best pop song of all time. There's a bit of a relaxed Mexican cantina feel, no mighty striving toward beauty or depth, nothing too remarkable about "remember to let her into your heart." There's an extraordinary solidity—imperturbability—to the barely perceptible buildup, though, and exactly two momentous artistic decisions. One is "the movement you need is on your shoulder." Apparently it was a scratch line that John talked Paul into keeping as-is. Wow. It somehow solidifies the idea that this is advice to a younger man—which would have been at risk to be obscured in a rewrite scenario—and suddenly brings confidence and physicality into the message ("you're waiting for someone to perform with" is certainly winningly forthright, too). Then there's that what-the-hell dive off the cliff into five minutes of na-na-nas. What were they thinking? But, so good. The acoustic guitar has an unlikely, trebly production that I'd have to describe as a *clank* that's somehow crucial to what I'm convinced is a delicate balance of the fadeout's success. There's also an earlier outtake where Paul goes up an extra bluesy step on the high "na" of each "na-na-na-na," and, you know what?—it just wasn't quite magic anymore. In the final, he backed it down to just the whole step. That seems to me to epitomize a kind of rare, hard decision made by people very, very tuned into how music works.

1969

"Long Time Gone" Crosby, Stills, and Nash
1969 was the cresting of culture as universally conceivable by Western youth: the moon landing, the last Beatles album, Woodstock. My experience of Woodstock was seeing the movie. As aerial shots assess the scope of the engineering project, CSN assess the scope of the task of reversing social injustice in the bluesy verse, then lay those angelic harmonies on us for "it appears to be a long, long time before the dawn." Very powerful.

"The Dust Blows Forward 'n the Dust Blows Back" Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band
Not very representative of *Trout Mask Replica,* which mostly sounds like Howlin' Wolf singing over what figure to be composed sections of free jazz, "The Dust" is an *a cappella* piece apparently recorded line by line as it was composed, using a portable tape recorder. The rustic characterization and intensely tactile and visual rendering make a deep, immediate impression, and provide the easiest way I know to make the case for the dotty, irascible Captain being an exotically gifted communicator.

"Something" The Beatles
"Something" could be the song most globally accepted as surpassingly beautiful; I certainly accept it going into that category. The first thought it occurs to me to add is to note Ringo's highly imaginative, fill-based drumming, which can only be described as majestic.

"I Want to Take You Higher" [edit] Sly and the Family Stone
The singalong from this was a key Woodstock moment, and for the first part of the seventies, with its hard rock riff, it was on the A-list of songs it occurred to teen bands to cover (normally non-singing members didn't need much selling on the idea of getting to do some "boom shaka lakas").

"Cymbaline" Pink Floyd
For some reason I fretted this inclusion; I came very close to replacing it with: "21st Century Schizoid Man," "Can't Find My Way Home," "Hello Suzie," "Doing That Scrapyard Thing," or "Dog Breath, In the Year of the Plague" (Zappa is very hard for me to commit unreservedly to). But I think despite some painful lyrics (really —"butterfly with broken wings"?), this has the most specialness to it. The chorus really is very catchy, and trusty Rick Wright seals the deal with a nice major seventh piano chord in said chorus as well as that otherworldly organ drone ending. I'm also tempted to call this the first important David Gilmour vocal success.

"Forget All About It" The Nazz
The singer is Paul "Stewkey" Antoni, but the occasion here is the dropping of the first major Todd Rundgren bomb ("Open My Eyes" is…*okay*). He's really bringing the art rock, too; it's very hard to follow along to that drum intro part—it must be good. The verse and chorus and guitar solo are all winners, but the epicenter of Toddness here is the bridge, with all the soul chords and especially the ur-Todd aside, "But that's just one of my own personal crusades."

"Goodbye" Mary Hopkin
This is a Paul McCartney give-away, and despite being decidedly non-rock, sounds noticeably less phoned-in than any of his material from *Abbey Road* to me. The horns on this are cheesy, but everything else sounds big and fat and good. Those first guitar notes are some of the biggest, fattest, 10:1 compressed old notes you could ask for.

"Candy Says" The Velvet Underground
The third VU album has always been my favorite, although I feel I should say I don't have any dislike for their loud, crazy side; "I Heard Her Call My Name" is amazing. Almost all the songs on the third record are phenomenal, and deeply musical in a conventionally recognizable way. Something about the Doug Yule-sung "Candy Says" strikes just the right note of emotional complexity: "I've come to hate my body and all that it requires" is unexpectedly direct and believable, especially balanced with the wistful but equally believable "I'm going to watch the bluebirds fly over my shoulder/I'm going to watch them pass me by/Maybe when I'm older…"

"Christmas" The Who
I remember as a nine-year-old being thrilled to pieces with the idea of *Tommy* as a "rock opera," where the songs were part of a story. About a year into knowing about it—it was my first knowledge of the Who, too—it occurred to me I pretty much didn't know what was going on at any point whatsoever of the plot. He had a feeling '21 was going to be a good year; he's deaf, dumb, and blind; he is a pinball wizard; listening to him, someone climbs the mountain, or vice versa. Good! Like it!

"Frank Mills" Shelley Plimpton, *Hair* Original Cast Recording
Considering my devotion to *Tommy,* it's a little odd I've remained so ignorant of *Hair,* but somewhere along the line I discovered and fell in love with this monumentally endearing little piece. I wouldn't like my chances of pulling off sung free verse, and this charms you into not only not noticing the lack of rhymes, but accepting it as a hook. It's hard not to smile just thinking of the exactly right delivery of lines like, "I love him, but it embarrasses me to walk down the street with him," and, "Tell him Angela and I don't want the two dollars back, just him."

“Whole Lotta Love” Led Zeppelin
This is where Zeppelin bought themselves their reputation among some rock critics for being thuddy and bombastic, which they aren’t at all; everything about the considerable power of this track is well-earned, well-crafted, and well-educated. This is a good place to start appreciating Robert Plant. It’s one thing to write lyrics that are among the best—Zeppelin don’t do that; it’s another thing, learned from blues, to make a recording where simple things are all you need to say to connect strongly.

“Je T’Aime…Moi Non Plus” Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin
After years recording plenty-respectable jazz, loose cannon par excellence Serge Gainsbourg turned to pop, and was alarmingly good at it, if apparently motivated almost exclusively to provoke scandal. “Je T’Aime” is a sublimely affecting pop instrumental over which Jane sings and acts whispered ecstasies, and a blasé Serge delivers dismissive asides as if off-camera, one infers for comic effect. It’s mildly amusing on the intended level, yet so indifferent to good taste the greater achievement is a sort of elevated pathos, as if demonstrating that earnest emotions define their own universe which endures the parallel presence of cynicism.

“Come and Get It” Badfinger
This was the signature song from a *now* Peter Sellers (and Ringo Starr!) comedy called *The Magic Christian.* I liked it quite a bit, and loved this song, which is effectively a Paul McCartney record.

“Gimme Shelter” The Rolling Stones
There were plenty of dark aspects to 1969, pretty well captured by the Stones with this song, particularly with its associations with the Altamont free concert that resulted in a fatal melee involving the Hell’s Angels, whom the film portrayed as being hired as security. Nineteen sixty-nine was also the year of the Manson murders, which became unwittingly associated with the Beatles’ “Helter Skelter,” and the what-the-hell Paul Is Dead rumor. Supposing you’re the Stones in ’69 trying to corner the dark market, you could have been considering it tough to catch a break.

“Venus” Shocking Blue
They were actually a very solid group, not one-hit wonders: excellent drums, excellent guitar. “Send Me a Postcard” from the previous year was another high point, as was “Love Buzz,” the original of the first Nirvana single. But the goddess on the mountain top, burning like a silver flame, was “Venus.” Man, this song knocked me out when I was a kid, and still does. The most inspired of the numerous uses I’ve seen over the years was for the scene of Marcia stepping out in a Brady remake.

"Fortunate Son" Creedence Clearwater Revival
One of the San Francisco Bay Area's proudest moments was this cry from the El Cerrito bayou. The guitar comes on here low, lean, and understated; nothing starts out sounding like it's getting ready to dust the competition. However, that little two-note answer from a second guitar at the end of the riff somehow starts building momentum. Fogerty takes it from there. I'm not sure the house looking like a rummage sale is damning evidence of class hypocrisy, but just about every other salvo in this song is right on target: the draft is an abomination to begin with, but to some extent it manifests a more general potential for oppression. "When the band plays 'hail to the chief,' ooh, they point the cannon at you." Talk about nailing it.

"Victoria" The Kinks
Here's an incredibly enjoyable song, and a reminder of how good Dave Davies was: the varied riffing, that great little walk down and then slide up on the extended chorus near the end. Ray gives an interesting put-on of a vocal; you're not exactly sure how much irony is there at any given time, be it celebrating "croquet lawns" or Victoria battling the world into submission.

"Something Better" Marianne Faithfull
This was a huge find for me: another writing triumph from Carole King and Gerry Goffin, produced by Mick and Keith, with gorgeous slide guitar from Keith. With its 5/4 section—and is that a piccolo trumpet?—we have my kind of prog-out going on here. Marianne Faithfull's talent is no longer a secret after *Broken English,* and this is her most important past achievement to revisit. It's mysteriously and almost aphoristically engaging with "Nothing can compare to something that's almost there," and "Smile on your jailers until they grow weak." Then come beautiful vocal harmonies on the elegantly dissolute chorus: "Say, hey, have you heard, blue whiskey's the rage?/ I'll send you a jug in the morning."

"Down by the River" [edit] Neil Young
No doubt about it, this one gets the dark side of 1969 right, too. This is one great chorus attached to one creepy song. "Be on my side, I'll be on your side" is a chilling way to start a murder ballad; throughout the song it's as if half of the singer's mind is reckoning with the enormity of the situation and half isn't—the latter half is just bugged by people giving him grief and making too much of things and so forth. I'm using poetic license here of course; I think I heard that Neil even said this isn't a literal murder ballad, just that the singer shot his chances with his baby. Whatever the claim: yeesh!

"Come Together" The Beatles
It's fantastic. The way it melds with a section of one's life and exchanges flavor with it is uncanny. Is it the coolest groove ever? It's doubly amazing how it's pulled off with no breath in the low end; it's

solid bass with no rests—usually a formula for muddy, cotton-head sound. Here it just works as the libidinous undertones of the Rhodes. Why *do* the lyrics work so well? “He shoot Coca Cola”; “Got to be good lookin’ ’cause he’s so hard to see”; “He say one and one and one is three.” What is even good about any of that? What does “Come together right now over me” even mean? The style continues in the vein of “I Am the Walrus”—a Joycean and puerile silliness delivered as relatively straight blues, but this time with a jocular patois, the way Professor Longhair might throw in “he come groovin’ up,” “mojo,” or “he got hair down to his knees” for local color. A self-conscious similarity to Lewis Carroll might be evident in the third appearance of the word “walrus,” as in “The Walrus and the Carpenter,” pointing up a shared tendency to use wordplay as a tool for digging into dark corners of human nature. What exactly was dug up? The “he” of the verses is clearly Lennon (“Bag Production,” “Ono sideboard”), and the narration is for the most part a litany of things that make him objectionable: bad habits, physical peculiarities, “disease,” non-conformism. “Come together” may be a double-edged sentiment: he had a rare vantage point to observe multitudes uniting in their opposition to a counterculture figure like himself. Dylan’s mysterious “Jokerman” also contains cryptic content that I want to parse as the persecuted prophet overhearing snatches of persecutors’ speech—and it’s interesting that here we also have “got to be a joker.” This kind of interpretation would be a stretch for most artists; for one who just got through writing “The way things are going they’re gonna crucify me,” less so.

1970

"Two of Us" The Beatles
The Twilight of the Beatles was indescribably surreal. Picture being a ten-year-old kid and, a few months after the smashing *Abbey Road,* reckoning with a Beatles bin populated by George Harrison's *Electronic Sound* (non-musical synth fiddling for half an hour), Ringo doing antediluvian standards on *Sentimental Journey* and country on *Beaucoups of Blues,* extensive quality-control–free peace, anguish, and wailing-themed product from John and Yoko such as *Unfinished Music Number 2: Life with the Lions* (one track was nothing but several minutes of amplified heartbeat from a baby Yoko lost to miscarriage), and a Paul McCartney record I must have held off buying until I could assess whether it was made before or after he died (remember that?). In the midst of all that came the confusingly timed but great as ever *Let It Be;* the substitute Paul sounds great with John on "Two of Us": in comes the warmth of a live bass player.

"25 or 6 to 4" Chicago
That's right, long ago, they used to be really good, and have horn arrangements—for my money, brilliant ones, this one being possibly my favorite ever with prominent trombones. In fact, trombonist James Pankow wrote a lot of the songs; keyboardist Robert Lamm wrote this, and a number of other durable ones. Peter Cetera seems to have co-written 1973's very respectable "Feelin' Stronger Every Day"—how did he end up so not a musician's artist? Maybe just smart.

"Come Saturday Morning" The Sandpipers
There was a line of thinking where the seventies were ushering in an era of vapid sunniness; the golden age of heaviness was over, and now there was just the cultural equivalent of that smiley face sticker everywhere (I own this song thanks to the sarcastic Rhino "Have a Nice Day" CD series). Let me first vote for this not being stupid soft rock, but a masterful piece of Fred Karlin melody writing whose jumping-off point is as much the Velvet Underground's "Sunday Morning" as anything, and second, let me vote that the pop culture aesthetic of the early seventies was one of the most we-demand-a-bad-taste-in-our-mouths periods ever. At least in cinema—forget *Saw,* I want to see someone make it through *Five Easy Pieces*—and when one day I see *The Sterile Cuckoo* for the music, I want it to hit me with the same dash of Sylvia Plath as "We'll travel for miles in our Saturday smiles/And then we'll move on."

"I Think I See the Light" Cat Stevens
Mona Bone Jakon is my overall favorite Cat Stevens album, and I couldn't pretend to separate the influence of the film *Harold and Maude's* most inspired of pop scoring. "Trouble" playing as Harold careens around—incredible. And where they're lying in bed and

Harold is blowing bubbles, little Cat Stevens comes in with this, sounding like the thunder of judgment day.

"Fat Old Sun" Pink Floyd

One great point of integrity of middle-period Pink Floyd was that they didn't succumb to the slightest anxiety over any piece possibly getting boring. My appreciable respect for the cow rock of the *Atom Heart Mother* suite is rather uncategorizable to this day, but "Fat Old Sun" is simply first-rate evocative, cattle-grazing-speed pastorale. Runner up: Rick Wright's "Summer '68," one of the rare songs from the era that will cut it with today's Brian Wilson people.

"Fire and Rain" James Taylor

"Fire and Rain" was the song that grabbed me the most, in the heyday of L.A. singer-songwriter music, as it actually happened. Neil Young and Joni Mitchell were a bit more a matter of retrospect. It transcended the limits of plainspoken songs using plain folk chords both in that the chords were in fact respectably expansive at strategic points (like either of the two changes in "Suzanne, the plans they made put an end to you"), and an ability to render loss with perfect chiaroscuro ("But I always thought that I'd see you again").

"Paranoid" Black Sabbath

It still sounds inimitably huge when the drums and bass come in, doesn't it? It's one of those instances where the band is just rock solid in some nameless way. And, there is only one Ozzy. I'm right there with "War Pigs," too, and can feel the excitement of coming up with a rhyme for "masses."

"Who'll Stop the Rain" Creedence Clearwater Revival

Only the second of the three choruses sets up a rhyme with "rain": "Five-year plans and new deals wrapped in golden chain(s)." I want to guess that was just unconsidered, but I'd sure respect it as a weird decision to make within their prettiest composition. Creedence were another key part of the real-time early seventies, as opposed to the retrospective early seventies of "In the Street" and *Hunky Dory*—especially growing up as I did in Creedence's geographical backyard.

"Sweet Jane" The Velvet Underground

I was used to the *Rock 'n' Roll Animal* version before I heard this, and used to thinking of Lou as a beyond-the-pale shooting-up transgender menace, untouchable beyond the likes of an entertainer like Alice Cooper. It was a real shocker to reckon a few years later with how much I inclined toward his temperament, especially as a melody writer.

"Tangerine" Led Zeppelin

Led Zeppelin III should have impressed rock critics with its challenge to

expectations, backing off from heavy metal in favor of acoustic folk and blues, with a strange and believable malaise to cuts like “Friends” and “That’s the Way” that recalled something like Skip James a lot better than foregoing British invasion projects. But then, that sounds like I know what rock critics are thinking, which I never do. “Tangerine” is one of those instances of vocals being better than on-key. You can really tell some of those notes are flat when there’s a harmony part, and I find every syllable beautiful and emotionally charged.

“Maybe I’m Amazed” Paul McCartney
Among other virtues, this proves Paul is the best non-improvised guitar lead player there is. He must have kept this song off *Abbey Road,* saving it for the solo, don’t you think? Tsk, tsk.

“Tell Me Why” Neil Young
After the Gold Rush is such a collection of little personal moments that it’s hard to pick one: to declare striking gold, as it were. “Tell Me Why” does the job for me. The harmonies are nearly the equal of CSN, but more casual and plaintive, much more the beginnings of a tearjerker than, oh, “Wooden Ships.” “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” is up there, but there’s something about, “Tell me why/Is it hard to make arrangements with yourself/When you’re old enough to repay/But young enough to sell” that captures the truth about being young without, for me, referring even to any particular financial reality.

“The Love You Save” The Jackson Five
It was years before I noticed that the boyfriends in the second verse had inventor names, as in, “When Alexander called you, you said he rang your chimes”—Alexander Graham Bell, get it? Making this a very clever but bizarre song, since the chorus conceit is traffic safety (“Stop, the love you save may be your own/Darling look both ways before you cross me”). Anyway, it’s a devastatingly catchy chorus tune, Berry Gordy’s polyrhythm-venturing production is exactly right, and the vocal trade-off from Michael to Jermaine works surprisingly well.

“Nature’s Way” Spirit
This was a record Peter Buck and I bonded over in the last long conversation I had with him. They were L.A. guys tops in their musical abilities and too counterculture to keep having hits. Mostly a repetitive mantra, the appeal of this one is all in the details: the guitar riff with the ninths plus the cowbell and tympani, the ornate harmonies, the loading of the line “It’s nature’s way of telling you something’s wrong.”

“Holy Holy” David Bowie
One of Bowie’s first incisive lyrics, the subject was probably close to

his heart: dread of having to be good and holy. “Helping one another/ Just a righteous brother” is a believably spiteful brush-off; “Holy holy/ Hold on to anyone/Hold on to anyone/But let go of me” is even better. And man, this is Mick Ronson the way God intended: harmony, devil of vibrato, and more sustain than Nigel Tufnel.

“Octopus” Syd Barrett
It must have been a labor of love supreme for David Gilmour and others to cobble together this incredible result from the raw materials of Syd’s measure-jumping, probably unrepeatable performances. Bold and confident in its chord changes and possessing a solid gold chorus hook, the song is tragic in its strong lyrical hinting at acknowledgment of mental breakdown: “You have no words/Please leave us here/close our eyes through the octopus ride.”

“Jewel Eyed Judy” Fleetwood Mac
With its odd rockabilly moments, the Danny Kirwan Fleetwood Mac was the last certifiably eccentric line-up, unless you count Lindsey. There were splashes of real instrumental loveliness (“Earl Gray”), and this tungsten-hard pop rock. The slow, slide-guitar accented burn leading up to the chorus feels like it’s going to explode, and then does, with the vocal-cord-shredding “Jewel-eyed Judy, please come home.” The playing is wedded perfectly to what seem like a number of extreme and inspired in-the-red stages: the noise floor is high enough that I suspect a lot of just turning things up, and the mastering yields a rapturous buzz in my vinyl single, improving a little on the album vinyl for degenerate excitement. That little guitar figure in the fadeout that only repeats twice is *God.*

“No Matter What” Badfinger
This is more properly power pop, and arguably the first of a handful of the true power pop masterpieces. Soundwise, it’s a joyous, overdriven throbbing of all things analog. What sets this apart from many pretenders to the throne is Pete Ham’s rich, resonant voice; he doesn’t sound like a kid. Likewise, this isn’t confession of adolescent feelings, this is laying down a commitment. One of many things that weren’t understood well enough in Badfinger’s time was their sense of gravity.

“Bell Bottom Blues” Derek and the Dominos
The best feature of the *Layla* album was the harmony guitar leads, especially in combination with yelpy, backwoods-sounding blues vocals. Sounds crazy, works great. You’d think it would be an impossible formula to apply to Hendrix’s “Little Wing,” but damned if they don’t come up with a version that’s better than the original. It’s the same formula on the all-out crawling-across-the-floor torch anthem that is “Bell Bottom Blues,” plus, if it’s true, there is the marvel of adding the tablas in the chorus of a song about stealing George Harrison’s wife.

“Lola” The Kinks

I’m confident that if this weren’t so gigantic a hit that it makes Kinks fans nervous about liking it, I would take the position that even with this fabulously rocking and humorous gem, they still can’t get their obvious due. The whole *Lola/Powerman* album is terrific if you ask me —“This Time Tomorrow,” “Strangers”—I think it’s my favorite whole Kinks record. Blasphemy. There were two lessons in commercial success for the Kinks here that they didn’t capitalize on: first, people love narrative concepts in pop music, but they generally accept it in the scope of a single song and reject it in the scope of a whole album, and, second, American audiences need more banjo music than they’re getting. The Kinks whetted our appetite with “Lola,” but then Eric Weissberg came along with the *Deliverance* theme and ate their lunch.

1971

"Maggie May" Rod Stewart
Appearing as it did in 1971, the big year for overwrought rock classics, it's a little mysterious that such a low-pomp, even low-hook song was able to establish itself as such an unchallengeable big deal. Its appeal includes some undeniably fetching folk music turns, some well-crafted bumpkin balladry in the mold of "Lola," and, most importantly, the ascension of Rod Stewart as the best singer in pop music. I've always found "Maggie May" strongly engaging in my life, although most likely as one of the earliest cases of a song I was keenly aware of *other* people liking before feeling the same keenness myself.

"Sway" The Rolling Stones
The Stones' image in this period was its own remarkable work of art. They were slightly androgynous, whisky-drinking libertines who styled themselves as devils, demons, yet were somehow your friends—sort of the same way all children start out loving pirates. It's not entirely obvious this is healthy, given a wide enough view, but it's perfect for this kind of creation: one of those great, sloppy sleepers of the era, kind of the "Dig a Pony" for people who wake up in unexpected beds. I was attracted to the band Madder Rose for covering it in the nineties.

"Day After Day" Badfinger
In their time, Badfinger suffered under the judgment that they perpetuated an earlier Beatles style from which the world had moved on, rendering the likes of the bona fide George Harrison participation here double-edged swords. Soon enough, two of the members killed themselves. And now, hey, they're actually the band from this era who sound fresh, like Big Star. There's a strange tragic weight to all of that. *Straight Up* is their strongest album, and "Day After Day" was their song that was the biggest part of my life at the time.

"Aqualung" Jethro Tull
Now, that is a riff worthy of a heavy metal Grammy. The liner notes were surprisingly sharp. Aqualung was a bum, "and the Spirit that did cause man to create his God lived on within all men: even within Aqualung/And man saw it not/But for Christ's sake he'd better start looking." That kind of smartalecky atheism I can get behind.

"Hope I'm Around" Todd Rundgren
The earliest evidence that Todd could do a certain strain of unrequited love song better than anyone else was the Nazz's "Gonna Cry Today." "You know, as long as I can remember, nobody ever got anybody back this way." There's a certain distinctly American humor and directness there, of real value at the height of the British domination of pop rock.

This was the second major installment, with a little dramatic irony of bringing someone in closer contact by way of sharing confidential information, at the moment of separation: "You better hope I'm around when you need me.… No one told me what to do when I needed you."

"Ella James" The Move

Michael Lockwood of Aimee Mann's band circa 2000 expanded my exposure to the Move to include *Message from the Country* (probably still favorite, barely: *Shazam).* It's a highly listenable, maybe just slightly ungainly brand of Lady Madonna art boogie at this late point in their career, on the verge of splitting into the Electric Light Orchestra. I want to complain about bad production, but have to admit I like listening to this over and over, more so than conventional good production. The drums are low, the bass is very trebly, the guitar is way up—not unlike the apparent theory behind *Underwater Moonlight,* but done better. That Roy Wood fellow could really sing.

"Easy Now" Eric Clapton

Eric Clapton was for two or three years one of the very best writers of this kind of soaringly beautiful pop melody. As with successor to the gift Alex Chilton, it seemed oddly unconscious, or unintentional, and had an occasional element of sleaziness to it that's incongruous, yet not strictly a mistake. I'm not sure how "making love against the wall" finds its way into this kind of a project, but "Please remember that I want you to come, too" seems gentlemanly under the circumstances.

"When the Levee Breaks" Led Zeppelin

I was 11 when "Stairway to Heaven" came out, which is when I started playing guitar in bands; all teen bands played it, and I tried to play it so many times it would be hard for me to say how much I actually *like* it. One very bad sign is that I don't know what it means to buy a stairway to heaven. Receptive as I am to there being a cautionary tale in there, I feel I could still be repeating whatever the error is; people could be saying, "Man, that guy—really buying himself a stairway to heaven." On the other hand, I'm certain enough that I consider everything about "When the Levee Breaks" awesome. I find the harmonica far more complex and haunting than any guitar on "Stairway." The drums are perhaps the biggest drums ever. Plant sounds like he knows the blues, and as I think is the case with Dylan, it connects with me to talk about implacable rising water.

"Fearless" Pink Floyd

Before Pink Floyd's presentation took a Macy's Day Parade turn, it was a sturdy little cottage industry: songs that showcased a single undeniably bankable sonic innovation. I could not have been more impressed. On "One of These Days" it was the tape echo that fell on the three count of a 3/8 beat, creating an automatic galloping rhythm. "Fearless" had possibly the best, which was a crowd singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" at a football match up some accidental interval

from the key of the song so it sounds like some sort of Lydian chant music.

"Wild World" Cat Stevens
This is one of the catchiest choruses ever, and one of those incredible fat, spare, acoustic Paul Samwell-Smith productions. I believe I recall a big rock critic (Christgau?) giving this flak for a condescending, sexist attitude toward the girl dumping Cat in the song; besides the "what about all other songs?" factor of that statement, it ignores that detail that it *is* a wild world and it *is* hard to get by just upon a smile —I take the point to be that there's a tendency to be naive inherent in the frame of mind of commitment-breaking, not the frame of mind of being female.

"The WASP (Texas Radio and the Big Beat)" The Doors
Here are the Doors at their Doorsiest: driving intensity, but with awkward Kurt Weill–like undercurrents and a willingness to believe in a wild heart of culture, for which the metaphor here is radio broadcasting outside of formatting restrictions. For me some of Jim's most memorable incantation is here: "Soft-driven, slow, and mad, like some new language," and, "They are saying 'forget the night, come live with us in forests of azure/Out here on the perimeter there are no stars.'"

"Life on Mars?" David Bowie
David Bowie is up there when it comes to people for whom the response to writing them off as trite or pretentious should always be: not so fast. The "sailors fighting in the dance hall" and the "law man beating up the wrong guy" are knee-jerk enough images in isolation, but in juxtaposition paint a coherent picture of mob mentality and crowd-pleasing gone wrong ("wonder if he'll ever know he's in the best-selling show"). The tune is the music-hall-descent-with-the-twist pattern (see "Whiter Shade of Pale") that announces its proficiency authoritatively with the "more" note of "lived it ten times or *more,"* and then delivers that all-over-the-map, big payoff chorus.

"Too Many People" Paul and Linda McCartney
Ram is undervalued; I think the world was starting to get its story together that John was the edgy, smart, free-spirit good guy, and Paul was the opposite of that. "Too Many People" would have been about the third-best song on *Abbey Road,* and one of many illustrations that when you heard any edgy, smart, free-spirit lead guitar in the Beatles, chances are it was actually Paul playing it.

"Imagine" John Lennon
When this came out, I remember it seeming likably *little*—not reading as anthemic or populist at all, just nervy, and slightly tossed-off. I don't think anyone puts "and no religion, too" in a song when aiming for the widest audience ever. It's a good enough post-eclectic-era

Lennon song, but the real power is leveraged from Yoko's innovations in instructional poetry; if you only knew 1966 Beatles and Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* from the time of their meeting, I doubt you'd think "Imagine there's no heaven" was a more obvious extension of the former than the latter.

"American Pie" Don McLean

It may be *the* catchiest chorus in history. I've for whatever reason always felt one inch away from outgrowing whatever this song is trying to pull—yet never quite over the line. Like "Won't Get Fooled Again," it's another of those summings-up of the sixties, by my best interpretation using a bargain-basement version of Lennon or Dylan wordplay to indict the erosion of rock and roll innocence into a modern version of Bacchanalian ritual. It feels odd to reach that far and then add that to some limited extent, he probably has a point; I've read enough rock journalists who are dead serious Nietzscheans to realize there's a lot of thinking going on out there that isn't anything like what Buddy Holly was thinking.

"Won't Get Fooled Again" The Who

Until *Exile on Main Street* came along, the somewhat unexpected winner of new-best-band-now-that-the-Beatles-are-gone was the Who, with *Who's Next.* In my version of the narrative, Townshend had something of an epiphany on the way to articulating the youth movement's revolution of the spirit, and that was that it was a revolution to end all revolutions that ended all revolutions. In other words, in some inevitable sense, more of the same. Much as I love that narrative, it's hard not to point to the real deciding factor being Keith Moon. Moon, my favorite drummer bar none (a position I learned from Joe Becker), is there giving every line a magic emotional kick in a way that is somehow more special than anything else going on—not to take a thing away from Townshend's inspired, forward-looking writing and arranging. Entwistle keeps right up, and "My Wife" is his best effort. Daltrey, I have discovered, tends not to translate to the next generation nearly as well as, say, Ray Davies, but kids, do Uncle Scott a favor and fight the ADD long enough to appreciate one of the great rock moments: when the medium-sized "yeah" scream in the middle of the song is followed by the big "yeah" scream at the end of the song. Fringe vests not dead!

1972

"Joy" Apollo 100
Breaking pattern, the *next* song is my choice for capturing the year's zeitgeist, but I was so keen on this song beginning my year 1970 collection with its Bach-rocking me-decade *Denim, Joy of Man's Desiring* exuberance that when I discovered I'd gotten the year wrong and this was really from 1972, the concept of using this as an opener was already ballistic.

"Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" The Temptations
1972 represented something of a peak of musical racial integration. When I was eleven and twelve, the radio stations in Sacramento that everyone listened to aired a continuum of black and white music that —while there was some stylistic distinction between R&B and rock— was all meant to be listened to by the same audience; generally speaking, the same people bought Sly and the Family Stone and Three Dog Night. By 1977, the tribe that had become disco people did not talk to the tribe that had become heavy metal people, and radio that wasn't market-specific became commercially unviable. It was a sad, epochal change, occurring almost overnight. "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone" was a shining example of what was to go missing from mainstream white audience music—and paradoxically, a lot of black audience music, too—in years to come. It's a one-chord, danceable song, but it's not a groove-based cut, it's a cinematic cut: impressionistically orchestrated, sophisticated in its lyrical and vocal drama. The presence of mind to make artistic decisions like treating troubled family relationships realistically, and a facility with one-liners like, "And when he died, all he left us was alone" could have saved countless hard rock projects from the scrap heap of zero-attention-span teen pandering that became their fate.

"Virginia Plain" Roxy Music
I still remember the ad in *National Lampoon:* "It's not rock—it's Roxy!" The music didn't filter to my demographic for another year, but that challenge to the zeitgeist by itself surely sowed seeds. Roxy mixed then-prevalent fifties nostalgia with hints of science fiction, and romance with ennui—to say nothing of Bryan Ferry with Eno—into a disorienting presentational culture shock; has the world fully caught up with "Ladytron" even today? The quick sketches of jet-setting circles in "Virginia Plain" find oddly apt punctuation in oboe, synthesizer, and Manzanera and Thompson's rock-hard eighth-note grind. Oh wow!

"Lean on Me" Bill Withers
On the foundation of one of the world's most quoted piano runs, the recurrently impressive Bill Withers tops even "Ain't No Sunshine" and "Use Me." This is one of the most believably altruistic lyric sets ("No

one can fill those of your needs that you don't let show"); it's a song that truly makes the world a little better place.

"C Moon" Paul McCartney and Wings
A couple of years before the Wailers' major label debut *Catch a Fire,* Paul and Linda McCartney were already all over the reggae. This B-side of the, uh, fire-friendly "Hi Hi Hi" is delightful, sensing a gap with the *next* generation who don't want to tell their daddies what their love is all about.

"Living in the Past" Jethro Tull
Remarkable for both its ability to pull off flute as a lead instrument and its ability to pull off a 5/4 time signature, this was recorded in 1969 but didn't get released, at least in America, until the *Living in the Past* collection made this and other fantastic early tracks available.

"Amie" Pure Prairie League
There's something quintessentially 1972 about Pure Prairie League's series of forgery-grade Norman Rockwellesque Wild West tableaus; like no other period in album history, all graphics were required to scream High Dollar Label Art Department. In this case the artwork matches the El Dorado detailing precision of this lovely song, but elsewhere it was amazing how there was no such thing as a band so humdrum as not to get decked out with a dead-serious Daliscape depicting the crux of psychology and spacetime.

"Superfly" Curtis Mayfield
Records could sure sound good in 1972. The bass and Latin percussion, the brass, Mayfield's amazing vocal—just a feast for the ears all around, as are most of the recordings on this list (we today are still lurching in fits and starts back to this level from the sad audio purgatory that was the eighties). Isaac Hayes pioneered the blaxploitation anthem form, but Curtis takes it to a level of high art with the dramatization here. "Ask him his dream/What does it mean?/He wouldn't know" is a great line, but the clincher is the little two seconds of "huh-huh" whose density of innuendo is inexplicably enormous.

"Dirty Work" Steely Dan
"I foresee terrible trouble, but I stay here just the same" is precisely the right phenomenology of the *other man;* the Dan came on the scene doing transgression and everything else exactly right, giving studio slickness a good name. The emotional pitch—sixths and ninths floating around to give a little tug of remorse here and there—is as noteworthy as the sheer musical invention. Donald Fagen didn't sing lead—yet somehow he's still the star when the soaring backing vocals come in on the chorus. My respect for *Rolling Stone* magazine ran the highest for picking Steely Dan as one of the best new artists at a time when I wasn't mature enough to come to that conclusion all by

myself.

"Rocks Off" The Rolling Stones
Exile on Main Street should have been the occasion for the world to declare in unison that in 1972 the Stones finally, without question, bested any interpretable combination of Beatle output. I know I did, and I was a screaming 12-year-old Beatles sociopath. Due to some freak weather pattern, a majority of listeners, especially critics, were slow to accept it. I recall hearing the words "muddy" and "murky" applied. Besides being the very essence of clarity, *Exile* is probably the greatest single-session album of new material that can plausibly be called a blues record. Somehow, starting off with this anomalous, slightly Tex-Mex rocker gets that job done, ratcheting the energy level up to the cacophony of Mick's and Keith's mismatched shouts through the chorus, and setting the stage with some of rock's most decadent lifestyle details. I spent many a rehearsal challenging myself and the band I happened to be in to pull off a decent cover of "Rocks Off."

"Give Me Another Chance" Big Star
The first Big Star album is a somewhat modest affair; it's very pretty, and the rockers are respectable in a slightly shrieky way, but the people who know what Paul Westerberg means by "I'm in love with that song" are probably not talking about "When My Baby's Beside Me." Even the canonical "In the Street," "Thirteen," and "Ballad of El Goodo" for me hold something back that finally hits on "I've been looking for to find/Something to believe in my mind/And I thought it was you." Who would ever choose the phrase "believe in my mind"? Yet, it somehow gets a point across that isn't conveyed at all by just "something to believe in." "Don't give up on me so fast/I see it's me that's wrong at last" is another early moment of relational awkwardness that somehow breaks down the thickest walls of interpersonal untruth using the lightest of musical tools.

"Roll Over Vaughan Williams" Richard Thompson
Richard Thompson's first solo album after Fairport Convention is a prickly affair, but probably my favorite work of his to date. It certainly shows off the guitar abilities for which he's justly celebrated, and his no-compromise morality greets the public with all the charm of "Don't expect the words to ring too sweetly on the ear/Live in fear." Another great and unique track is the Irish-folky "The Angels Took My Racehorse Away."

"Big Brother" Stevie Wonder
Talking Book is such an embarrassment of riches, it's hard to pick a favorite. "Superstition" and "I Believe (When I Fall in Love…)" are both certifiable classics on completely different levels. The bluesy, beatnicky, slightly West African sounding "Big Brother" is my very favorite. It gives the mind that's tired of hearing about children dying an overdue talking-to; I love, "Your name is 'I'll see ya.'"

"Hang On to Yourself" David Bowie
What a year—*Ziggy Stardust* is up next. We all know all about it. For me, "Hang On to Yourself" is where it fires the afterburners. Stupid words; this is all about the acrobatics they do varying that riff, and the sheer sound of the acoustic guitar locking in with that tight-as-hell electric band. The way it infuses that Eddie Cochran half-step slide-up with seventies power nominates it in my pantheon for being a key forerunner of Sex Pistols classics like "God Save the Queen."

"Rock & Roll, Pt. 2" Gary Glitter
I have to roll my mind back to before the ubiquity of this as a sporting events sound bite, to when it was the craziest, most revolutionary thing on AM radio. Just these troglodytes yelling "hey!" over a very decent slide guitar instrumental. There's some magic gating and delay to the sonics that put it across, not to mention how good those "heys" really are.

"All the Young Dudes" Mott the Hoople
This is in a category I called "music hall descent with the twist," to which I've received the excellent feedback that church music and Bach are at least as relevant there. The extent of the twist is the big deal here: "All the young dudes carry the…" is the set-up, then the minor on "news" is cool enough, but then "boogaloo dudes" seems to take up a new descent, then "carry the news" is a radical, unexpected resolution—he has to cheat back up to the fundamental key in the turnaround. Ian Hunter makes you not even notice the words are crap—except for the rather amusing "I needed TV when I got T. Rex."

"And You and I" Yes
Yes were an entity unto themselves. They made a good living fitting in with arena-caliber art rockers like Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, but they had an organic approach and a world-class rhythm section that yielded fresher, more inventive, better integrated recordings than similar acts. As with their peers, Jon Anderson's stream-of-consciousness lyrics can carry some mythologizing dead weight, but there is a prophetic sensitivity, particularly to environmental concerns, that assures one of always trying to get at a difficult truth and occasionally succeeding. The whole *Close to the Edge* album is art rock at its finest, with "And You and I" containing some of the most delicate and rapturous instrumental passages—in the latter case, the big, slow synth refrain. And let's not forget fantasy landscape illustrator Roger Dean's importance in the ascent to prominence of album art; it's probably not an exaggeration to say he's the person most responsible for there even being the concept of album art coffee-table books.

"Couldn't I Just Tell You" Todd Rundgren
Something/Anything was a milestone in record albums' ability to

achieve direct and intimate personal communication. It accomplished it with frankly light fare (like “I Saw the Light” and “Hello, It’s Me”) and frankly humorous diversions (like “Wolfman Jack”), but the way it modulates over its two albums to weightier material—“the kid gets heavy,” as I believe the album puts it—is nuanced and moving in and of itself. “Couldn’t I Just Tell You” arrives as Todd has loaded the bases in a way that will never quite be the same again, and hits one out of the park. Likely the greatest power pop recording ever made, it’s somehow both desperate and lighthearted at the same time—with both the believable abandonment of “you can turn your back whenever you please” and the confessional cleverness of “I’m not a coward if that’s what you believe” and “couldn’t we pretend that it’s no big deal?” The guitar solo features some truly amazing dexterity and inflection, and that open-string reinvention of the theme near the end is simply awesome. He’d probably thank you to remember that he’s a guitar great, and the evidence is right here.

1973

"Can You Hear the Music" The Rolling Stones
1973 was the peak of the *classic* seventies, as opposed to the later *punk/new wave* seventies. Nowadays, 1973 is one of my favorite music years, but it must be said that at the time it felt like civilization had crested with the Beatles and the moon landing, and now was just deteriorating into "Top of the World" and Watergate. Consider *Exile on Main Street* being followed by *Goats Head Soup;* don't pay much attention, and it just seems cheaper and stagier. Pay attention, and there's gold, like "Can You Hear the Music," which I hear as the Stones' first serious return to Brian Jones territory: flute, dark psychedelia. "Love is a mystery I can't demystify/Sometimes I'm dancing on air and I get scared"—not textbook Mick Jagger, but maybe a window on something he was actually feeling.

"Needles in the Camel's Eye" Eno
I once had the chance to ask Brian Eno what he had wanted to do with lyrics at the point of departing from an approach as socially charged as Bryan Ferry's. (He said, "What you don't say is as important as what you do say.") I'll let that thematize this start of a four-album run constituting the era's most successful experimental pop music. The key to success appears to have been making a science out of decision points (see "Oblique Strategies") rather than being willfully *weird* or *different* at the usual unexamined decision points. How about if several guitars have fearsome vibrato? Do they cancel to something quasi-normal? Kind of! Choosing this song over "Baby's on Fire" was a very close call, and I'll note that "Baby's on Fire" contains my single favorite rock guitar performance, the lead by Robert Fripp.

"Speak to Me/Breathe/On the Run" Pink Floyd
Dark Side of the Moon was the great harbinger of the "solid state" aesthetic that would endanger sound quality almost as much as anything since consumer audio was—we now realize—at its best, around the late fifties. It's a fine aesthetic, but mostly just because Pink Floyd were extraordinarily good, especially David Gilmour's singing and what I credit to be Roger Waters's, let's call it, "cinematography." A nice low noise floor and lack of audible crummy reverb do not perfect sound make; the vocal mike signal chain sounds outright botched to me. But the managed jazz influence, the use of available-to-anyone sound effects, and the cool sequencer bloops had nations erroneously reasoning "who needs big, fat-sounding anything?" for years.

"So Very Hard to Go" Tower of Power
This is one of my favorite soul progressions: subtly surprising, harmonically complex without turning soapy, and decorated with state-of-the-art horn arrangements. Listen to that descending line after

"I could never make you unhappy": that's people making some music. It's rare that you hear lyrics taking apart a moral achievement in real time this convincingly: "I've got to make it right for everyone concerned/Even if it's me, if it means it's me what's getting burned." It would be beyond my best efforts to tell it that straight.

"Everyone's Agreed That Everything Will Turn Out Fine" Stealers Wheel
It's the same artist who did "Stuck in the Middle with You" (the singer was Gerry Rafferty, of the great "Baker Street"). Important: this is the original single, not the substandard remake on the otherwise quite good *Ferguslie Park*. For such a halting groove, it's oddly propulsive, and there's something about the nothing-really-happens tune as tone poem for the words ("everybody seems to have a good time, nobody goes stepping out of line") that ends up really ringing my bell.

"Jet Boy" [edit] New York Dolls
This is one of those years where there were *many* songs it *hurt* to leave off ("Sail On Sailor," "That Lady" by the Isley Brothers, "Willow's Song" from *The Wicker Man,* "Band on the Run," to name a scant few), and to cram more in, I resorted to using ProTools to edit some long songs down to just what I felt like hearing. So, okay, I am evil. But my God, don't some songs need some freaking trimming down? This is one: whiskey-voiced, three-minute hard barroom boogie about an above-it-all rival, that *goes on for six minutes!* But I do have to re-do it to somehow retrieve the off-key "oo-wee-oos" at the end. It's the only moment you can really picture them in drag.

"Just Don't Want to Be Lonely" The Main Ingredient
Gorgeous chorus, and how great a line is "I'd rather be loved and needed/Depended on to give a love I can't give"? I've probably listened to this song two hundred times, and I laugh every single time I hear "say wait a minute…where you going with that suitcase?"

"Gimme Danger" Iggy and the Stooges
When I first got *Raw Power,* bargain, used, '76 not '73, it was with the understanding that no one on God's earth liked it, with the sole exception of Lester Bangs at *Creem,* who wouldn't let the issue drop; big credit to him. If you don't know what the Stooges sound like yet, this isn't it. It's actually one of the more Velvets-like Stooges songs—heavy folk content, even some creepy viola—and the first one I attached to. "Search and Destroy" is amazing, but the mix was so bad it got in the way of enjoying it. "Gimme Danger" sounded very good even on the original pressing. Iggy is sort of doing Son House on the vocals or something—for my money an inspired device whatever it is.

"All the Way from Memphis" [edit] Mott the Hoople
I seem to recall you heard "glam" in connection with Mott the Hoople in those days, what with Bowie writing "All the Young Dudes" and all,

but somewhat surprisingly, they appealed just fine to what would later jell in my mind as the Bad Company audience. The image projected by the Dolls or Mott was that glam was just today's reason to get hammered. If you don't like this chorus, there's something wrong with you, especially if you saw the use in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore.* The edit is just that I shortened the fadeout.

"Sweet Lady Genevieve" The Kinks

To me, this tops any but maybe two or three sixties Kinks numbers, and no one knows about it. At an L.A. tribute show with Dave Davies in about '95, I chose for my two-song allotment this and, I think, "I'm in Disgrace." It's from the point of view of a troubadourish rogue who loved and left a maiden on a, uh, previous tour, but has now decided she's the one. There's a magic combination achieved among the harmonica, harmony vocals, and lines that are apt to go on two or three words longer than you expect.

"Knockin' on Heaven's Door" Bob Dylan

There's a scene in *Don't Look Back* where a *Time* interviewer makes some reference to Dylan's vocals not being as good as Pavarotti's, and Bob says, "I'll have to disagree with you; my songs have a *lot* of notes, and I hit them all." Well, so he does. Anyone who doesn't think Bob Dylan can sing hasn't listened to "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," a masterpiece of technique (perfectly understated vibrato) as well as feeling and idiom. And what a tearjerker.

"International Feel" Todd Rundgren

Todd is a weird, weird guy. Not always even anywhere near good, but approaching infallible in the early seventies. *Something/Anything* was fantastic, and *A Wizard/A True Star* (how about the cojones to choose that title?) is somehow even more remarkable if not categorically *better*—side-long, break-all-the-rules art rock suites that happen to be consistently tight and entertaining, if difficult. "I only want to see if you'll give up on me" indeed. This opening sequence is so densely packed with unfamiliar sonics charmed into cohesion that it can't *not* mean a lot to a listener like me; I want to cover the song (Mitch Easter did once), and it is a *hard* one to figure out. Oh, the patented Rundgren 1971 2k snare sound is there, doing just the right amount of damage.

"Certain Kind of Fool" The Eagles

Is it just me? I've never met an actual Eagles fan. Yet, they're something like the biggest-selling band in history. It's like, most people must buy an album at far below the level of conscious enthusiasm—sort of, "oh well, this is something people buy"—and the Eagles devastate that market. Otherwise, statistically, I ought to know at least a couple of people who decided to start a band the day they heard "Best of My Love." Yet, before whenever that sorry pattern started, they were minimally very decent, and at moments, great. "Certain Kind of Fool"—a neglected moment from *Desperado*—is great.

If you don't count "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," it's the best (only?) classic gunfighter ballad since "El Paso," sensibly paced, not a bit hokey. I *adore* the change at "He took it to the *country."*

"Drive-In Saturday" David Bowie

The remaining songs here are immensely formative and important to me. "Drive-In Saturday" is about future nostalgia for the present, and probably did instruct me that sentimentality is relative in that way. But as much as it is a cynical, William Burroughs–like exercise, it manages to touch a true nerve of human longing, and certainly fires on all cylinders as satisfying music. "She'd sigh like Twig the Wonder Kid and turn her face away" parallels Lou Reed in something like "there are even some evil mothers who will tell you…that women never really faint"; these are not shock-mongers, they have been more devastated than most at the prospect of the world's capacity for tender emotions being lost—or just a person's.

"The Song Remains the Same" Led Zeppelin

"The Song Remains the Same" is about as symphonic and polychromatic as any essentially three-piece combo has ever sounded. John Paul Jones does at least his share of the heavy lifting; the guitar keeps your attention, but it is a stunningly expressive bass part. An unconventional, exploration-of-terrain sort of song structure, it gallops through moods and reference points effortlessly, maybe something like "Rhapsody in Blue." I want to guess there's a little influence from the group Yes in there.

"Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding" Elton John

I badly wanted to edit some or all of the first part out to make room for another song, but the rocket engine of "Love Lies Bleeding" somehow depends on the solid fuel of "Funeral for a Friend." Dear Lord, there is some cheesy music in there, but never quite hack work, and there's a period of ramping up to "Love Lies Bleeding" that lets you know they're starting to mean business. Crack outfit, this. Very busy but entirely meaty bass. Guitar riff for the ages.

"My Old School" [original radio edit] Steely Dan

This song will get me out of deathbed depression and back to loving life with mechanized efficiency. The spot-on lead vocal, the unequaled horn charts, the enrapturing Jeff Baxter guitar solos: what an achievement. I'm not the right person to run down all the names and places in the song, but I somehow felt the story of rambunctious behavior colliding with collegiate community with a strange immediacy.

"Do the Strand" Roxy Music

The most stunned I've ever been by a song played in a record store was when "Do the Strand" came over the P.A. at the Watt Avenue Tower Records. It was like nothing I'd ever heard before. The stop-

start arrangement, the other-planet key change of the piano riff, the Boris Karloff singing. I was mesmerized. No one I knew followed anything like this, and it took me months to track down. What did he say? Do the *what?* I might credit it with doing more to kill my instincts to produce commercially viable music than any other three minutes of my life. If my calculations are correct, this is the first really great Chris Thomas production (he of *Never Mind the Bollocks);* he had his hands full with so many instruments, and it all sounds *so* big, *so* clear.

"Living for the City" [original radio edit] Stevie Wonder

"Her clothes are old, but never are they dirty." Talk about economy of expression (and I'm going to tailor a bit of my own by excusing myself from treating the long album version with the talking part that doesn't quite work for me). Of all the jaw-dropping brilliance on what for me are the peak Stevie Wonder albums, *Talking Book* and *Innervisions,* this is the pinnacle. First and foremost, that recurring 3/4 instrumental break with the "da-da-da-das" is simply mind-blowing. All these years later, I couldn't begin to explain in terms of any theory what makes it work. It simply takes all possible crazy melodic turns but somehow sounds like it was intended from creation. This was obviously a big hit, not an obscurity, so I think it's worth taking a step back and re-appreciating what a hard-hitting chorus this has. And it's just one line: "Living just enough/Just enough for the city." I have sure felt that, but I can't fathom the ingenuity it would have taken to phrase it like that, having *how much* you're living be about *what the living is for.*

1974

"Boots" [edit plus ~30 sec. of "Numb Erone"/fadeout] The Residents
I don't think I knew them except for the defaced *Meet the Beatles* cover that was *Meet the Residents* I'd see hanging on specialty used record store walls, until I got their *Duck Stab* e.p. in 1977. After the Mothers' *We're Only in It for the Money,* should it be possible to get to be the most subversive act by dissing the Beatles—don't you now have to dis the Mothers? At the very least, the Residents were subversive in an appreciably novel way. Neither parody, exactly, nor anything like Zappa's end-run at the level of musicianship or that of modern composition, the Residents were something like pure expressionism: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* minus the story arc. Or what we have here, Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walking" minus its entire cultural context. And sung by Dr. Caligari.

"Radar Love" [radio edit] Golden Earring
In retrospect I like 1973 a lot because now I know about *Raw Power, Aladdin Sane,* and other material that didn't make it to thirteen-year-olds, but at the time 1974 seemed a lot better, because there was starting to be a radio niche where louder rock was a growth industry —Joe Walsh, Bad Company, Bachman-Turner Overdrive, and similar acts were having FM hits and also getting on TV on a new late-night network live rock format: *In Concert, Midnight Special,* and *Don Kirshner's Rock Concert.* "Radar Love" by the Netherlands' Golden Earring was my favorite of this direction (though I don't believe I saw them on any of those TV shows).

"Mandy" Barry Manilow
Barry used to go on shows like *The Mike Douglas Show*—daytime variety—and the point of interest was that he was the guy who had written or sung several of the most prominent commercial jingles, like "You deserve a break today, so get up and get away to McDonald's" and "I am stuck on Band-Aid, 'cause Band-Aid's stuck on me." Interestingly, this didn't read as objectionably commercial to me, just curious and fun. Same with "Mandy": it's so frankly melodramatic that you can't fault it for it. It's the missing link between "Bridge over Troubled Water" (check the reverb snare near the end) and '80s power ballads, an unpromising type, but the melodic and lyrical connectivity is so winsomely direct that it's hard not to accept "You came and you gave without taking" as sincere.

"Home" Roy Harper
Roy has had a very interesting career (at about this time he was honoring Pink Floyd's left-field request to sing lead on "Have a Cigar"), first as an acid-tongued folk rocker, then as an acid-tongued art rocker, and here as a sweet-talking pop rocker. On the CD my wife

has, I believe this is identified as a single; I'm not sure if that was intention or reality. Anyhow, it's a simple little thing that's quite impressive at doing what Big Star does: working with unusually pretty melodic elements but bringing a surprisingly crunching rock whenever necessary. This sounds great right after "Mandy"—its intro's flutes and delicate strumming sound at least as non-rock as Mr. Manilow, then a muscular rhythm section comes in with the words "And I need some lovin'."

"All I Want Is You" Roxy Music

I want to put the epic "Mother of Pearl" from *Stranded* here (the problem is I think it's technically a 1973 release), but it may be slightly more important to have the peculiarly challenging *Country Life* represented anyway. "All I Want Is You" is in a way simplistic compared with "The Thrill of It All" and "Out of the Blue," but it's punchy, economical, and has a strange way of co-opting the worldly sophistication it professes to reject in favor of monogamy in lines like, "Don't want to know about one night stands/Cut price souvenirs" and "Don't want to learn about etiquette from glossy magazines."

"Jungle Boogie" Kool and the Gang

Kool and the Gang's hard funk sounded great on the radio with "Hollywood Swinging" and even better, and harder, with "Jungle Boogie." Its complex chromatic ascents and descents in odd bursts make it one of the most harmonically rich one-chord songs ever—it strikes me as slightly influenced by Edgar Winter's "Frankenstein." All the "Get up with the get down" is done really well, and probably contains the single best "uhhh" on record. To quote my six-year-old, "Does he even have any bones in his mouth?"

"Boy Blue" Electric Light Orchestra

Eldorado (the one with the ruby slippers) had stupid moments, but is mostly a very good album. "Can't Get It Out of My Head" is a gorgeous Rodgers and Hammerstein–influenced radio hit, and most of the songs have strange, rococo hooks to them. "Boy Blue" seems to be a crusading soldier who comes back and tells the town it's not worth the bloodshed. The alarum trumpet fanfare is a cute production touch, and the pizzicato string break is one of the early seventies' best symphonic pop sections, of which there were more than a few.

"Just a Chance" Badfinger

Poor Badfinger—this was the *second* record they were contractually obligated to deliver every year starting in 1974. The first was the, unsurprisingly, very rushed-sounding self-titled album with the lady with the Ascot bowler hat and monocle. It had the terrific "Lonely You," and a very good one called "Song for a Lost Friend"; beyond that, there's some unfortunate material. The basket into which they may have been putting eggs is *later* 1974's *Wish You Were Here* (not to be confused with). Both albums were produced by Chris Thomas, but the first one sounds awful and the second one sounds great—it even

sounded a little like Foreigneresque arena rock a couple of years ahead of its time. In a good way. "Just a Chance" roars in; it almost doesn't sound like the same band. The chorus doesn't really go anywhere, but on balance another Badfinger gem. That album also had the more conventionally catchy "Know One Knows."

"Sweet Home Alabama" Lynyrd Skynyrd

I recall hearing "Sweet Home Alabama" on the radio when it came out, but I don't think I ever heard "Free Bird" from the year before. Besides being a great hook, it set the standard in my world for fancy playing in a non-prog setting. That is, I wouldn't have known how to compare this non-cape-wearing musicianship with that of Yes, ELP, or King Crimson, yet I still tried to play it. And, my man Al Kooper nails another production. But, okay, is this a *stupid* answer to Neil Young's "Southern Man" or what? I really don't suspect Skynyrd of having been racist, and I'll suspend disbelief that they're jumping in to defend George Wallace, but "Watergate does not bother me"?

"#9 Dream" John Lennon

Both "Mind Games" and "Meat City" were good, but it was starting to seem like too long since a really good Lennon song. "Whatever Gets You Through the Night" was, uh, all right, and I was cheering for it to top the charts, albeit with some amazement, but "#9 Dream" was the first real reappearance of the 1967–1968 John—the one who could write the chords of "I Am the Walrus" or "Sexy Sadie."

"Gun" [edit] John Cale

"Gun" really christened Cale the wild man for me. I heard it in my familiar Watt Avenue Tower Records and walked around for many minutes assuming it was some Velvet Underground I hadn't heard (which at that point was still a lot) until I talked to the staff. In fact the guitar is Roxy's Phil Manzanera, and, pardon me, it's a good deal beyond Lou's limitations. The lyrics are a somewhat cartoony narrative about some species of low-life killer ("me and my partner") —you're never quite sure what manner of law they break or enforce— and the guitar itself conjures everything from ambulance sirens to screaming distress. The snare-on-the-beat drumming is played just right with the ensemble to conjure its own alternative momentum. I edited the eight-plus minutes down to between three and four— retaining most of the important guitar soloing. Another "job"; blood everywhere; we get it.

"Free Man in Paris" Joni Mitchell

Here is more of the hyperpersonalized lyric portraiture of *Blue,* only more sophisticated—mostly a good thing. This is a more climactic melody than anything on *Blue,* although it's not as bare-nerved. I think the song is supposed to be about David Geffen's ruminations.

"Tell Me Something Good" Rufus

A phenomenal Stevie Wonder composition, it's one of the hardest songs for me to count straight through and not get gutterballed onto the off-count by the verse vocal. It was starmaker machinery (as Joni would say) for Chaka Khan, but I'm as much impressed by Al Ciner's rude metallic guitar, and the beautiful bass, clav, and heavy breathing groove.

"Amateur Hour" Sparks
The whole first side of *Kimono My House* is splendid. "This Town Ain't Big Enough for the Both of Us" is so big; Sparks in a way invented what Queen do and never got credit. "Falling in Love with Myself Again" and "Thank God It's Not Christmas" are adept grandiosity with a good heart. Very 19th century, really. "Amateur Hour" rocks the hardest in my listening test. There are some slightly embarrassing adolescent humor moments, but of course that is the whole point of the song. I love "She can show you what you must do/To be more like people better than you."

"Rikki Don't Lose That Number" Steely Dan
There's a tantalizing hint at what the set-up to the relationship and the passing of the phone number are. Some days I think it's an estranged parent talking ("We can stay inside and play games, I don't know"), but I take that and other touches to be artful ways of adding weight to the feeling: a friend in town has heard your name; we've heard you're leaving. People care about this phone number being passed. For a plain song, there are a few utterly unexpected chord changes. Brilliant playing.

"Killer Queen" Queen
In this teenage symphony to gaudiness, Queen come up with the headiest brew yet of old-timey jazz, blues, and baroque as a futuristic device following the Bowie recipe. Brian May and Freddie Mercury vamp and phase shift their way to a fantastically rewarding listen.

"Tangled Up in Blue" Bob Dylan
The Italian poet from the 13th century has to be Dante, right? "Pouring off of every page like it was written in my soul, from me to you" is spectacularly good writing. First, no one thinks of describing literary passion in a pop song; second, even if they thought of it, no one who attempted it would be any good at it except Bob. This was the first inkling I had that he was for real in a way that was probably unique within the whole generation, and I was helped along by the fact that it's a very forthcoming and lovingly crafted record. But what did the girl in the topless place hand him, *La Vita Nuova?* Or the *Inferno?*

"Sweet Thing/Candidate" David Bowie
The cover prepares us for the fact that *Diamond Dogs* is a monstrosity. I like just about every cut, possibly excepting the disco version of

"1984" (I like the earlier *1980 Floor Show* live version a lot), and the most monstrous is my favorite. Sounding like a B-movie Scott Walker, Anthony Newley, and Mae West, Bowie tour-guides the brothel district of his Armageddon city. It's off-putting—maybe Mike Garson's florid piano qualifies it as one of the few legitimate successors to Charles Mingus's *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*. Personally, I *adore* Bowie's own sax work and guitar work. When the digression called "Candidate" kicks in, all the rockets fire. The storm of half-conscious images culminating in "Bullet-proof faces/Charlie Manson, Cassius Clay" is amazingly similar to Joyce's "Circe" chapter of *Ulysses,* which is in turn similar to Goethe's Walpurgisnacht in *Faust.* John Easdale once did a cover of this that captures the crazy power.

"Back of a Car" Big Star

There's a good chance *Radio City* is the best album not by the Beatles; it's hard to evaluate the way one does other contenders like *Who's Next* or *This Year's Model* because those albums made a big splash, and *Radio City* went so completely neglected on initial release (I didn't know about Big Star until 1980). It's hard to describe how certain I was, almost immediately, of the record's greatness. Auteur Alex Chilton typically disavows that much specialness; he once said something like, "Those are just the chords your hands want to play on guitar if you've been at it a certain length of time." That (probably botched) quote is just more specialness to me: sorry, Alex, vicious cycle. The second, diminished chord of "Back of a Car" is palpably unlikely except maybe in 1920s blues, although, you know what?—your hands do like to play it. Maybe it's about doing what your hands want. Besides the music, the sound engineering of *Radio City,* its sheer management of tremendous energy in the high end, is incredible. Here's one where I insist on the vinyl source, which achieves a combination of depth and luster that, if you just look at the graphic EQ, would spell thin and hissy in almost any other recording. Yet, there's a cradling, bass guitar–dominated low end that somehow reads to the ear as big without being high volume. The lyrics of *Radio City* are an interesting analog to the mind-grabbing Bill Eggleston photo of the red-ceilinged room on the cover. That black light astro-sign sex position poster occupies the same realm of gently scrutinized artifacts of youth as the whirring teen thoughts in the lyrics: "Sitting in the back of a car/Music so loud I can't tell a thing/Thinking about what to say/And I can't find the lines." Alex was of course at least as dismissive of the lyrics as the music, and it's possible to see that he wasn't going for articulation of marginalized teen vulnerability, nor probably taking any of the kind of literary aim that could hit a target by *Like Flies on Sherbert:* no youth-speak pastiche on *Radio City* is as witty as "My rival, he drives a Triumph sports car, has muscles, and is a deceitful person." One impressive twist is "I know I'll feel a whole lot more when I get alone." There's a rare astuteness about that. Then there's the patented Chilton wrong yet strangely right diction of "I'll go on and on with you/Like to fall and lie with you." Why is that so good? There's a longing in there for a sexual connection to act as a leap of faith—a context in which words fail by nature, except that here in Alex's little song, maybe they don't quite fail.

1975

"Bohemian Rhapsody" Queen
1975 felt at the time like a year of decline—more so than 1974, which seemed at the time like a rebound year. The Beatles' supreme stylistic sway, as well as the pancultural attention they attracted for rock music, was on the wane. Turning 15, I was beginning to produce demo tapes and have conversations with people who listened for hits, and the sound they were listening for was light, slick grooving the likes of "Get Dancin'" by Disco Tex and the Sex-o-lettes and "Love Will Keep Us Together" by Captain and Tennille—the opposite of my skill horizon. Most harder rock was gravitating toward a juvenile audience —see Kiss. It was a year of decline for rock, but an explosive year for comedy targeting a rock audience, with the appearance of both *Saturday Night Live* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.* Queen's *Night at the Opera,* like a few inclusions here, was to the first approximation a comedy rock record—the shopworn rock opera concept played somewhere between camp and parody. Freddie Mercury, Brian May, and breakout producer Roy Thomas Baker were right for stardom in the post-Zappa universe where garish elements stood a chance of passing as some form of funny.

"Complainte Pour Ste. Catherine" Kate and Anna McGarrigle
This very French language folk-style number is lyrically a piece of modernist poetry, not something devotional, although probably a lament of politics and expediency displacing spirituality. Particularly with the accordion, the traditional instrumentation is ironically a forward-looking approach that would continue to make sense in the context of back-to-basics acts like Camper Van Beethoven.

"St. Elmo's Fire" Eno
I first became aware of Brian Eno the avant-garde force (not just the Roxy wacko-glam synthesizer player) in a TV news item on the Portsmouth Sinfonia—an ostensibly straight-faced art project orchestra of untrained musicians—which Eno produced. It was fascinating, but illustrated a threat that could loom near Eno projects: an unreliable distrust of conventionally competent playing. This threat in no wise affected the 1973–1977 pop vocal records, which were generously decorated with world-class performances, here the mesmerizing Robert Fripp solo.

"No More Looking Back" The Kinks
The Kinks tried to work the rock opera thing through most of the seventies; critics hated it as unproductive gesture—which, alas, it was —and since the world didn't have ears for the occasional redeeming track, it did them less good than just expending no thematic effort. I thought most of the songs on *Schoolboys in Disgrace,* especially this and "I'm in Disgrace," were a return to the high quality of *Lola versus*

Powerman and the Moneygoround. The anti-education sentiment is a bad first step toward *The Wall,* but it had that 1975 excuse of being played somewhat for humor. "No More Looking Back" sure sounds like it should have been a hit, if anything by the Steve Miller Band can be.

"Little Johnny Jewel" [composite edit of sides A and B] Television
Television turn one of the most bankable bass hooks I can remember into one of *the* milestone indie singles, applying Tom Verlaine's nascent crazed guitar lyricism and some beatnik teen-speak-chic lyrics (you know there's art afoot with someone named Verlaine singing "Little Johnny Jewel, he's so coo-wel"). I edited it—if I recall correctly, from about eight minutes down to about five minutes; Little Johnny is cool but not *that* cool.

"Lady Marmalade" Labelle
One disco release I liked quite a bit was Labelle doing "Lady Marmalade." The song and Patti Labelle's vocal are 99% of the story here—fine, raunchy soul hit material, and all—but it's Allen Toussaint's production that gets my undivided attention. The horn charts are excellent, a little reminiscent of Chicago to me in their subtle chord shifts, and the New Orleans–based soul keyboard is grounded in things I like: I'm imagining I'm hearing a little Dr. John and a little Billy Preston in there. I guess what we're hearing is mostly the Meters.

"I Don't Know Why" The Rolling Stones
Allen Klein's head-scratching odds and ends concoction *Metamorphosis* proves you can drill down pretty far and still not find bad Stones material. This 1969 recording of a Stevie Wonder song is absolutely first-rate, especially Mick Taylor's electrifying slide guitar solo.

"End of the Line" Roxy Music
On *Siren,* Roxy started being less outright peculiar, if you don't count the communist dictator get-up Bryan Ferry wore on the tour for it. "Love Is the Drug" and "Both Ends Burning" are good songs and more obvious choices, but "End of the Line," with its country twang and spine-tingling harmonies, is the one I most relish actually listening to.

"Better Off Dead" Elton John
What might surprise today's music fans looking back at the willfully grotesque autobiography *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* is what a gigantic hit it was. Elton John was such a megastar, he could for years put out music that defocused badly from his considerable talents—and those of Bernie Taupin and those of his band—and it just didn't stop selling. "Someone Saved My Life Tonight" is a truly awful song—a saccharine melodic non-starter where the singer pats himself on the back for leaving someone at the altar. "Sugar bear" is rhymed

with “You almost had your hooks in me, din-cha-dear?” You don’t think songwriting can get worse than that—until “Thank God my music’s still alive.” But I digress. “Better Off Dead” is an entirely swell little result tucked away near the end of it all; the lyrics are as expressionistically overheated as the worst of the *Captain Fantastic* material, but somehow they work: “The cigarette haze has ecology beat” is Taupin right on target before he starts chewing scenery with “the whores and the johns.” The musical invention is firing on all cylinders, the fancy vocal arrangement is well worth the effort, and that drum echo that’s louder than the original signal is twisted genius.

“Thunder Road” Bruce Springsteen

I have a serious love/hate relationship with this song. For the most part, I think the album is overrated; there’s just not enough *there* there in the composition. “Thunder Road” is the one that stretches out the most, and it’s the one I like the most, but from the first sung lyric it stays a little aimless. The finale always gives me chills, and makes the road straighten behind it as it were—but I’m not sure I’m proud of that reaction. Really the singer is feeding this poor girl such a banquet of self-mythologizing nonsense as to make one weep. The message is: “Trade in these wings on some wheels… It’s a town full of losers/I’m pulling out of here to win.” Quiet good deeds and unheralded personal sanctity are for suckers; it’s all about cobbling together an elitist worldview from whole cloth and putting it over for material advantage. So, this is good wild-oatsy stuff, but I’ll say it again: if you want world-class lyrics with a reasonable ethical grounding, go try that joke of a flitty chimera David Bowie.

“Poker” Electric Light Orchestra

ELO do in fact have their fans among hipsters, but often enough a case needs to be made that they compete convincingly for your seventies rock dollar. “Poker” is a stunning track—it’s fast, it’s hook-filled, and the orchestral strings gimmick finally comes off as a good faith effort to rock harder. The lyrics are a great, big step up for Jeff Lynne, and as fate would have it, work as a knowing and prophetic answer to the Bruce of “Thunder Road”: “The ace that’s hiding up your sleeve/Will cause the world to grieve/The love you had is gone…. The dream in every player’s heart/To win it all, not part.”

“How Many Friends” The Who

Do people even remember there was a Who album called *The Who by Numbers?* With the cringe-inducing single “Squeeze Box,” it would be understandable if they didn’t voluntarily. But it’s a great album—pound for pound, their third best after *Who’s Next* and *Tommy*. “How Many Friends” is very frank confessional—including what I take to be a gay encounter with dubious motives, and an articulation of betrayal by the music business. Moon is great; *Entwistle* is great. I find the chorus unforgettable, and what a seventies treasure is the rhyming of “sum us up” with “bum us up.”

"Gloria" Patti Smith Group
Horses is an awesome whole album. I want to give "Land" a lot of credit for how petrified I was the first time I listened to it at 2:00 a.m. in the dark on headphones. But as with the Doors, this isn't just a poet's album, there's a *lot* going on here musically. The poetry is definitely a young person's, ultimately just a cheap transgressive high dressed up, but what a dressing up. Everyday experience becomes a facade ready to give way to an "atmosphere where anything's allowed"—here, conquering a "sweet young thing" in the manner of Van Morrison and Them, tracing the impediment morality to the executive level: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." That's still one of the most bracing opening lines in any piece of music.

"Win" David Bowie
"Win" is the standout track of the bizarre, sometimes very disappointing *Young Americans* album. The Lennon collaboration "Fame" is great; Lennon's "Across the Universe" is horrid. Game to make a true Philly soul album and possibly extremely coked up, Bowie came up with such staggering lyric sets as "Young Americans," and such gorgeous music as the slow soul burn of "Win," putting David Sanborn to inspired use. Not quite the equal of "Young Americans," "Win" is still a fantastic set ("Life lies dumb on its heroes/Wear your wound with honor, make someone proud/Someone like you should not be allowed to start any fires"), and how about those *incredible* backing vocals?

"Something for the Girl with Everything" Sparks
The Mael brothers, looking something like a much fruitier Kevin Cronin on vocals and Adolph Hitler on keyboards, began a long career holding pattern after 1974's brilliant *Kimono My House*—but their best song is here, on the mostly not great *Propaganda.* The deliciously twisted baroque melody supports a drama whose deftly constructed back-story involves a young girl who has to be paid off in gargantuan favors lest she reveal some deadly secret. Muff Winwood's production is 2:16 of glam adrenaline. "Wow, the engine's really loud!"

"The Rover" Led Zeppelin
The production here is modest. It's easy to imagine them walking into any band's practice studio and demonstrating just through the might of their talent what separates the sounds they make from those of mere mortals. Consider the *dinky* sound of Page's guitar on the middle solo; yet, it holds together as if its gravity were enormous. There's enough transparency here to observe just how much Jones's growling bass accomplishes, especially in tandem with Bonham. I seem to recall Mitch Easter and I agreeing in about 1986 that this was the secret great Zeppelin cut—in both our cases, the first of theirs we'd cover if an opportunity arose.

"Mondo Bondage" The Tubes

Before their period of cranking out rather humdrum smash hits like "Talk to Ya Later," San Francisco's The Tubes had their day as the most compelling of the comedy-oriented rock acts, with a beautifully over-the-top cabaret presentation, and just maybe the world's best assemblage of musicians on a good day. Drummer Prairie Prince was very possibly the best drummer, with Moon in slight decline; Michael Cotton played synthesizer with an ultramodern sheen that could turn maniacally savage, as on the solo here. "Mondo Bondage," one of their various semi-satire production numbers—this one a photo op for on-stage fetish costumes featuring somewhat undressed model Re Styles—is a brilliant piece of music. The main groove is a throttling round of electric guitar, clav, synth, and the occasional orchestra hit; the chorus is a mind-bending double-time 7/4 pattern over a half-time 7/4 pattern. Al Kooper's production is theatrical perfection. Then there's singer Fee Waybill, for whom words fail in a couple of ways; mostly, he's really good. I remember some critic referring to his range as "two notes, both flat." Cute comment, but I don't think so, bub. Check out the pre–Auto-Tune final note of the performance here and tell me how good *your* favorite singer would sound attempting that. Or any of this challenging delivery, actually.

"Wish You Were Here" Pink Floyd

Ah, a return to the great early post-Barrett Floyd days—exemplified on *Meddle*—of one song, one clever sonic idea. The hyperintelligently paced and deployed *Wish You Were Here* was the best Pink Floyd album, the last one before Waters became angst-minister. So there's this crummy transistor radio playing in one speaker, changing stations, and after it settles on a little acoustic guitar pattern for a while, a live guitarist who's in a room *next* to the radio, starts playing along (stunningly, one has to add), and eventually the song comes in. See, that's what I call getting my entertainment dollar's worth. Pink Floyd's lyrics don't ever get *scarily* good, but these are just right in a Dylan kind of way. There's an odd lack of punchline payoff in the litany of things the listener thinks he can tell, or they got him to trade. "Hot ashes for trees…a walk-on part in the war for a lead role in a cage." Help me out. The second thing (trees) starts out being better, but then the first thing (a walk-on part in the war) is better, right? I mean, a lead role in a cage does not sound good. Still, war? Anyway, none of that really matters; the difficulty in naming the source of the disillusionment is part of the genius of conveying the feeling of reaching out to a fellow confused soul. "Running over the same old ground/What have we found?/The same old fear/Wish you were here" is more loving than hopeless—and the Floyd don't allow themselves that tone lightly.

1976

"Neat Neat Neat" The Damned
At the time, 1976 felt like the Waste Land—like the whole system for music providing sustenance and glory was showing terrible signs of breaking down. But this was mostly true of the way big British rock acts had been servicing my particular needs, and unbeknownst to me at the time, rejuvenation was underway, mostly for American music but also for British groups like this lot: punk rockers. We've got all this perspective and humor about it now, but this was one of the first loud, fast, short songs I heard that had the kind of following to suggest the future was going to be anything but more and more arena rock and disco, pure and simple.

"You Tore Me Down" Flamin' Groovies
Another brave and successful stand for what was good about sixties music was the Flamin' Groovies' *Shake Some Action;* this was the pinnacle of the Cyril Jordan/Chris Wilson version of the band, which somehow reminds me to put in a good word for Roy Loney's "She's Falling Apart" from 1970's *Flamingo.*

"Sara" Bob Dylan
This is a haunting and touching folk ballad, by all appearances a fairly direct piece of personal communication to Bob Dylan's real estranged wife, Jakob's mother.

"Hand of Fate" The Rolling Stones
The Stones really sell every item on the menu of the genre-hopping *Black and Blue,* including this gunfighter ballad; cor blimey, I think they pulled it off! "And I watched him die, watch out, boy, I watched him die" is a convincing echo of "Folsom Prison Blues."

"Station to Station" [edit] David Bowie
I edited this down to about half the length; it *does* go on. But, a crucial success for Bowie. *Young Americans* had amazing moments, but seemed to be bad news—first-class as the lyrics to the title song were, there was no averting one's eyes from the capitulation to radio. *Station to Station* began the gestation of the orneriest Bowie so far, the one intertwined with *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and Carlos Alomar.

"Knowing Me, Knowing You" ABBA
Sue Trowbridge converted me to the wonderfulness of this song long after the fact. It's remarkable how completely ABBA anticipated the 1980s in a song like this: the big beat, the cold and monumental sonic textures, the theme of autonomy. Don Gibson used to sing about "this lonesome old house"; Anni-Frid Lyngstad sings—no less convincingly

—about how lonely the house is *going* to be after she gives him the boot, which she is quite sure is for the best.

"Tightrope" Electric Light Orchestra
Always threatening to reinvent themselves according to some horrifying new presentational theme, now it was: we're not prog, we're disco! This was a very good song—for 1976, the year of *Blue Moves*—and it ended up being as far as I went with the gauzy, orchestrated treble-rolloff rock of ELO. To this day I somehow don't feel I know what Jeff Lynne's voice sounds like—as if what I'm listening to is something like vocoder. I like the sound better after decades of bad digital concessions to "crispness," and can better appreciate how Lynne achieved the ultimate honor of being the ex-Beatles' most important shared technical guru.

"Cliché" Todd Rundgren
This perfectly delightful song unfortunately illustrates a certain creeping crumminess to the sound of many mid-seventies mainstream recordings. The FM radio era just brought an aesthetic requiring too many tracks too laboriously recorded; the industry had iron-poor blood. The emotional analog is the self-conscious and bloodless romantic encounter portrayed with a keen eye and ear by Todd: "And if the very next words leaving her lips could decide/If he'd go or if he'd stay/She would play that old cliché."

"Anarchy in the U.K." Sex Pistols
As the first shot fired by the Sex Pistols, this has obvious impact and merit; still, it has bugs that were later worked out with the incendiary "God Save the Queen" and the fairly similar "Holidays in the Sun." I don't know if vocal harmonies suit them, or, actually, if anarchy suits them. It's the sensitive introverts who always think they will somehow rise like cream the day all of society's silly rules and regulations go away.

"Song for Sharon" Joni Mitchell
I can listen attentively to all 8 minutes and 40 seconds of this—a rare statement for me. Every couple of verses contains one of those zingers of a payoff, like "but all I really want to do now is find another lover," or "There's a gypsy down on Bleecker Street.… She lit a candle for my love luck and 18 bucks went up in smoke," and the serious story on the subject of getting married is a deftly rendered whole, too.

"Roadrunner" The Modern Lovers
Here's a sporty little number from this supergroup-in-retrospect (Cars, Talking Heads). One of the nagging questions in rock is: What happened with Jonathan Richman? He had a world-class flair for driving, slightly primitivist approaches to low-level alienation with a warm heart. Then after punk hit, he switched—forever—to not-at-all-driving, really primitivist approaches to states of childlike optimism.

I've always *wanted* to like his results, and usually I in fact have, but there's some unrelenting intrusion of, well, nobody makes a doctor TV show where all that happens is people receive good news at their check-ups; it's kind of, *that*.

"Blitzkrieg Bop" Ramones
At 16, I remember disliking this the first time I heard it. I thought it was English, and associated it with more trouble somewhere along a continuum from the Bay City Rollers to "pub rock"; I soon enough figured out the error of my ways and got right behind it, but I feel it instructive to note that I needed advanced education in ironic valuation of music to make the math work.

"Condition Red" Sneakers
In 1979, at 19, I was feeling pretty pleased with myself for the indie e.p. I'd just put out, until I heard this atomic bomb of an e.p. from '76 by the Sneakers, led by one Chris Stamey. It was one of those TEAC 4-track, recorded in the school gym type of projects right after my own heart, and done to frightening perfection. Everything from the believably big guitar and rhythm section to the impossibly cool vocals screamed to me: this is the kind of achievement which years of your hard work might one day be worthy of producing. It remains a grievous error that the world didn't immediately fall in line and go Chris's way. To the extent that it did, e.g., R.E.M., it has been better off. To be that young and writing lyrics that snappy is criminal. "It's funny, you don't look like a character assassin"; "Everything you see reflecting your point of view.… Let's be American."

"Final Solution" Pere Ubu
This sounds like the hard as steel, no-nonsense 4/4 beat Wire spent years striving toward. Much as it could be said to have architected the chilly post-punk aesthetic with its telemetry synth and foreign-film guitar sonics, it was upon close inspection a relatively good-natured riff on teen awkwardness. Apparently there was no intentional off-color allusion to Hitler's "final solution," a reference they were chagrined to be informed of.

"(Don't Fear) The Reaper" Blue Öyster Cult
This was my favorite 1976 song that I actually knew about in 1976—my teen band covered it—and I'm glad it took me years to be horrified by the suicide-encouraging lyrics. Between Patti Smith's guest appearance on the album and "Reaper"'s spine-tingling guitar theme and harmony vocals, there was a period of it being not nearly as difficult for me to respect Blue Öyster Cult. And let's face it, sometimes people have an itch that can only be scratched by cowbell.

"Say It Ain't So, Joe" Murray Head
One of those songs I heard once in a record store and then spent some time tracking down is this from Murray Head, who has had

remarkable careers in both music and acting, decorated with cash as well as cred (he was the singer on "One Night in Bangkok," and, closer to my heart, was Judas on the original 1970 *Jesus Christ Superstar* opposite Ian "some stupid with a flare gun" Gillan as Jesus). The song apparently transplants the phrase from the kid talking to Shoeless Joe Jackson during the 1919 White Sox scandal to a scenario of disillusionment with an unnamed "leader." And, scary how well it works to imagine *Judas* singing it, taking the modernist sympathy-for-the-villain thing just one step farther! It's a simple but, to me, really emotionally engaging melody with a bridge that has an exquisitely dramatic buildup to a return to the chorus with just enough ramped-up histrionics. Ex-Yardbird Paul Samwell-Smith applies the same beauteous acoustic production he used on Cat Stevens to one of at least two of Murray Head's obscure pop albums with moments of greatness—the other is 1971's *Nigel Lived.*

"American Girl" Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

The Tom Petty debut has never quite made it to the status as one of the classic records, which it deserves. I found a site, acclaimedmusic.net, which figures to be a somewhat systematic measure of such things, and looking there I notice it *does* have the song "American Girl" pretty high up, but the wrong place for this album is somewhere below Kiss's *Destroyer.* It prefigures the so-called new wave renaissance of highly effective small combos returning to basic rock elements; "American Girl" is the most generous as a little symphony of brilliant arrangement details, and the lyrics capturing a *girl's* (interesting choice of perspective) "one desperate moment" of unrequited love, with a vague hint she might jump off a balcony, offering the unexpected but strangely effective answer, "take it easy, baby, make it last all night." There's an element of discomfort discussing the poetry of a guy with a bullet belt under a Flying V through a heart (don't ask me why I actually like that cover), but you could do a whole lot worse than clarifying your "American girl" icon as economically as with: "raised on promises."

1977

"Janie Jones" The Clash
Punk rock was the biggest music movement in my mature experience. To the extent that punk rock had a populist, revolutionary esprit de corps, the Clash were its ministry of information. As time went on, I found it more and more mysterious that their critical and popular acclaim grew so huge, but in the early days when gorging on JEM indie 45s was in its first flush of pure satisfaction, the Clash were right up there: "White Riot," "City of the Dead," "White Man in Hammersmith Palais"—and this, first song, first album. They could write music, and they had an instinct for entertainment: just try not to sing along with "really tell the boss/Gonna really let him know exactly how he feels/It's pretty *baad!"*

"Aliens in Our Midst" The Twinkeyz
Writing one punk song proved I didn't quite personally fit in, but soon enough I found two Sacramento groups that did, well enough: one was the Twinkeyz. They all worked at local record stores where I hung out, so I was able to absorb the mechanics of pressing the disk, getting it in a little upright display on key record store counters, playing bar off-nights and weirdo thrown-together shows. I've never since gone a day without considering this little single a top-tier DIY classic.

"Ça Plane Pour Moi" Plastic Bertrand
"New wave" could at first be loosely defined as "the Sex Pistols minus some or other key elements." These amped-up Belgians perfected the angle focusing on Chuck Berry–based guitar and speedy, fuzzy, hot production. I once did guest vocals on this with the band Christmas, you guessed it, making up fake French as I went along—that *must* prove the dumb fun is right where it should be.

"Reuters" Wire
This is the whole opposite side of new wave, that would evolve into the equally mysteriously named "post-punk": depressive, arty, singer chewing syllables. Bad news over Reuters: the "wire," get it? The *Pink Flag* album had quite a few moments, but to me 1979's *154* is where Wire really became themselves.

"Go Your Own Way" Fleetwood Mac
I don't recall giving this song enough of a chance until deciding at the time of *Tusk* that Lindsey Buckingham was at some level my kind of troublemaker. But what exactly did I then give a chance? Almost all the words and tune are pedestrian, and the recording has a bad enough case of mid-seventies tired sound: too clean in a fizzy way, too many overdubs, too many tracks played back seven hundred times. I don't think I know for certain whether the song actually wants or

doesn't want "you" to go "your" own way. In the end nothing triumphs here for me but several above-average singers saying the words "go your own way" together in a way I infer must be emotionally engaging for some hypothetical third party. Weird that in music, that's sometimes all you need.

"Bored Teenagers" The Adverts
The not quite as good (and tacky) A-side was "Gary Gilmore's Eyes." This tune points to one of punk rock's many benefits: prog-rock ideas tend to get corralled together in one cost-effective, drama-packed bridge section because you daren't say boo in the verse or chorus.

"Hanging Around" Stranglers
Ordinarily more than one minute of instrumental improv is going to have one of two effects on a song with respect to this selection exercise: (1) get it axed, or (2) in the case of an exceptionally good song, get it edited. Hugh Cornwell's and Dave Greenfield's splendid guitar and keyboard interplay is a rare exception: it's the listening highlight of a track that is high quality in every other way as well.

"I Feel Love" Donna Summer
Giorgio Moroder's riveting all-synthesizer production is, but for no more than two handfuls of others, the first and last disco or techno record I feel has notable artistic merit. I'm even at something of a loss to explain why, as indebted to Kraftwerk as it is, I like this better than I like Kraftwerk.

"Wuthering Heights" Kate Bush
Everyone has the same thought after the first line of "Wuthering Heights": "What the hell?" Ms. Bush by all indications deliberately hops on stage with a somewhat screechy character voice (*the* Catherine, pining on the moors for *the* Heathcliff)—in her own way announcing her intention to be as uncompromising as any punk artist. The singing gets a little more normal into the song, the better not to distract from the tune's flat-out gorgeousness; this is truly the poster child for: "Oh, *that* song? I *love* that song!"

"Where the Fun Is" Chris Stamey
As adept and nuanced as anything from Richard Rodgers or Van Dyke Parks, this B-side from an underground New York scenester single is not even a diamond in the rough, it's a diamond, period—a big rock. It's Stamey and producer Alex Chilton—sounding very much the Big Star *Third* Alex—playing all the instruments, and it's the perfect combination of studio chaos and off-the-scale sophistication. What a shame an accomplishment like this can simply fall off the edge of the world.

"What in the World" David Bowie

There's something very special about *Low*. For starters, the snare drum sound—regenerating harmonizer—is undoubtedly the most important inspiration for '80s gated reverb (or tied with Peter Gabriel's "Intruder"), only—how does one put this delicately?—without being horrible. It not only instantly positioned Bowie to survive punk/new wave unscathed, but it lives on as the epitome of artistic reinvigoration. I guess the snare in combination with Carlos Alomar's nasally, bracingly fresh guitar and Eno's and Visconti's ears for the *new* account for something like half the story. The lyrics come at you with relative simplicity, from unexpected angles: "I'm just a little bit afraid of you, 'cause love won't make you cry." When Bowie reminds you he's in contention for best lyricist going, he does it with a disconcerting lack of ceremony.

"Oh Babe" Van Duren

Van Duren is an odd case. Like Alex Chilton, he was a Memphis singer-songwriter who relocated to New York in the late seventies—there are some interesting overlapping sound elements—and like Alex, he occasionally reveals immense talent. Though not in the same league as Alex for lifetime achievements, Van does earn his mention in the same breath, and was from 1977 to 1978 not inconceivably the best male pop vocalist on the planet. If one wonders what eventually went wrong, it's tempting to point to a dire susceptibility to drifting toward schlock, but "Oh Babe" shows just how beautifully things could at times align: sapidly nostalgic lyrics, crack arrangement, a souped-up easy listening style veering between "Thank You Friends" and "Marquee Moon."

"Dogs" [edit] Pink Floyd

I've confessed to editing long songs, and this is my masterpiece: the side-long *Animals* opus edited to—are you sitting down?—five minutes and 45 seconds. And I'm fairly convinced most people relatively familiar with the song would not actually notice. I give you "Weener Dogs." It has all the stuff one really needs: the bit about picking up the easy meat with the club tie, the harmony guitar lead, enough of the harmonizer dog barking to say "we were there," and all of that "born in a house full of pain" section—untouchable as the only time Roger ever sounded better on vocals than David Gilmour. It doesn't have the "sad old man dying of cancer" verse, but if I may whisper it between us, I think someone thought that was an absolute zinger, as if people get cancer because they deserve it.

"Sixteen" Iggy Pop

Iggy didn't cruise to post-1977 acceptance; the story twist was that Bowie corrupted him with art-damage or some such nonsense. I want to say *Rolling Stone* gave *Lust for Life* two out of five stars at the time of release—at any rate, something that contributed to my impression that they were getting serious about being morons. The second and better of the two '77 Bowie collaboration records also contained the scalding "Lust for Life," "Some Weird Sin," and "The Passenger"; there's something about the lacerating guitar of "Sixteen" coupled

with the “funky bar [where] everybody’s so fine and they don’t need me” that for me gives it the edge. “Now baby, I know, that’s not normal….”

“Father Christmas” The Kinks
The relatively elderly Kinks embarrassed themselves not one tiny bit with this bruising think-punk single. To think they probably could have been rocking this hard for years but for lack of just the right nudge.

“‘Heroes’” David Bowie
No one needs to be sold on “Heroes,” right? (Or do I mean “‘Heroes’”?) You know, though, I should put in a good word for “Helden.” He released French and German language retakes, and the French is valueless, but the German has some sort of special fury to it. I’m breaking my rule against artist double-inclusion here. If you ever put out *Low* and “Heroes” in one year, I’ll do it for you.

“Watching the Detectives” Elvis Costello and the Attractions
The remaining four songs represent something very close to a resurrection of pop music from death. It wasn’t for lack of talent or good intentions that pop was dying, just something like alcoholism: one day more of a good thing—longer songs, more tracks, bigger recording budgets—just started hitting diminishing returns. Then a few brilliant small combo acts turned things around—did it with honest talent on next to zero tracks in next to zero takes. The Attractions certainly came in with a bang. Elvis with Clover was just fine, but this high-octane reggae with the well-too-creepy lyrics brought a sudden end to the possibility of sitting complacently in the same room with it.

“Psycho Killer” Talking Heads
David Byrne is a treasure. The hook of naive fascination with everyday experience kept a lot of flavor for a good long time, and he was a true and passionate music person, too: loved making a guitar stretch its role. Another great and economical small combo, their secret weapons were a deep mastery of R&B, and the intelligence and precision of Tina Weymouth’s bass playing. She keeps it simple on “Psycho Killer,” but little decisions like the staccato pulse, and downward walk at the start of the chorus, push it into the realm of greatness.

“Venus” Television
I remember bonding with Susanna Hoffs over this song at a show in 1983. I love “Little Johnny Jewel,” but the advance from that to this is breathtaking. They are suddenly a bold and confident outfit. You like the crowed vocal or you don’t—I definitely do—but there can’t be any such thing as not liking the guitar work—cascades of panoramic, spine-tingling lusciousness from the first note to the last.

“God Save the Queen” Sex Pistols

I’m very glad I got this when it came out; I’d otherwise be tempted to consider myself swayed by later public opinion. I was the very first person to buy one of five import singles made available in a tiny pile on the floor near the rear exit of Tower Records, and when I got it home and played it, it was like sparks were coming out of it. I’d seen a TV news item that treated the Pistols as a joke, which in fact remained their reputation among arena rock fans: ha ha, guys with joke names who can’t really play their instruments! A shot of Lydon doing a studio take sounded awful. It somehow felt like something I needed to check out. Mercy. Lydon is so very terribly freaking good on this, it’s scary. His pitch, his ability to go from singerly to defiant, the way his voice responds to punishing levels of overdrive, are all fantastically successful. The guitar and drums are phenomenal, and both have at least a couple of very fancy moments, too. You heard less and less about the funny Sex Pistols as band after band probably had occasion to A-B the Pistols’ joke music with their own good, powerful music, and have it flung hard to the back wall. I’ve never been exactly comfortable with the apparent fact of the Sex Pistols’ power being ultimately a result of willingness to side with offenders against the offended (in a word, to victimize), but I think they hang on philosophically by a thread, that thread being a strain of morality impervious to authority and authority-haters alike. Surely no unruly mob ever rallied around “Bodies.”

1978

"No Action" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
Most at-all-flammable corners of pop music were now on fire with punk/new wave. Nineteen seventy-eight was the year some of the most complex of the practitioners came out fully baked, and the most important of several towering album results is Elvis Costello's *This Year's Model*—almost unquestionably one of the ten best rock and roll albums ever made. The first thing to worship at this altar is Pete Thomas's godlike drumming. Most studio wisdom has always been: keep it simple and supportive. He doesn't. He can, but not on "No Action"—he bolts like a sprinter toward the finish line, and Elvis and the band had better keep up; after it's over, he's warming up for whatever else you've got. Which of any of those fills isn't a high-risk triumph? The formidable drama of Elvis's refusal to give up on romance in the face of perfect disillusionment is played out more fully in other songs, but consider the packing of "Sometimes I phone you when I know you're not lonely/But I was disconnected in time."

"D.I.Y." Peter Gabriel
All three of the *Peter Gabriel* solo albums, with the crusted, glittering Styrofoam of Genesis chipped off, are pretty interesting. Although—don't hate me—"Solsbury Hill" doesn't rate with this one. What is he saying with, "Come up to me with your 'What did you say?' and I'll tell you straight in the eye, hey, D.I.Y."? Doesn't matter—he's apparently not good at it. What counts is that he's in a righteous snit about whatever it is; that and the half-step ascents are my cup of "hostile and hard."

"I Am the Cosmos" Chris Bell
Once-flowering Chris Bell's emotional valediction has an inimitable faded grandeur to it. It's a bit like *Berlin* but more lovesick—and for real. It was Chris's bona fide Geoff Emerick/Abbey Road moment; he'd earned it. You can hear just enough of Bell's claim on Big Star in the tantalized sevenths and "Every night I tell myself, 'I am the cosmos, I am the wind'/But that don't get you back again."

"Candy's Room" Bruce Springsteen
A sort of cross between the Raspberries and Rambo, "Candy's Room" has such a way with working a theme, and with sheer overheated velocity, you ignore the doing-working-class jive of lines like "she has fancy clothes and diamond rings." The drum roll rhythm is a swell idea, there's a simple, awesome, Alomar-worthy guitar solo (is that Bruce himself?), and if it isn't the old Spector-ready glockenspiel.

"Shattered" The Rolling Stones
Finally Jagger's counterfeit-gay seventies thing was put to good use:

comedy. A Joan Rivers of a song, the rhythm section is the Stones at their percolating *Some Girls* best, and I like the two-chord pattern that gives way in the bridge to any-chord-is-fair-game. I'm a-shattered! Uh-huh!

"Comes a Time" Neil Young
I always think: okay, Neil, Mr. Famous, you've got Emmylou Harris to sing harmonies, you'd better nail the lead. Yes, of course he does—this is a best-of list, right? There's a real sweetness to this song. "This old world keeps spinning 'round/It's a wonder tall trees ain't layin' down" is a wonderful Rodgers and Hammersteinesque trope, like, "The wind is so busy, it don't miss a tree." On some days I don't think the half-time chorus is such a good idea, but other days I think it's perfect. The little string wash after "comes a time" is definitely perfect.

"Hanging on the Telephone" Blondie
The totality of *Parallel Lines* is a more significant achievement than just this, the best song, but we all know the song will do. But don't forget to go revisit something like "I Know But I Don't Know."

"Hair" Willie Alexander and the Boom Boom Band
Let's say I heard "Hair" in a shopping mall. It will never happen, but suppose. I would stand up, unable to hide my exhilaration, and probably start singing along with "That's right it don't matter no more," mortifying my family. I don't get too many Willie converts, but I will take my faith to the grave. *One star* in *Rolling Stone?* What medication were those people not getting? The drum production is weak, but Billy Loosigian's screaming lead guitar obliterates any possible excuse for not getting this.

"Non-Alignment Pact" Pere Ubu
One of the earliest and most important indie albums to make waves in what was threatening to solidify into a majors-only world, *The Modern Dance* was clearly capable of very respectable hard rock and chose to vary the sonic palette bravely. I love the way the chorus could almost pass for "na na na na hey," but is really "non-alignment pact."

"Make a Scene" Van Duren
Idiot Optimism was a shelved release until 2003. It's so remarkable (not that one would necessarily call every cut a success) that I'm putting this blazing Chris Bell cover here, and a Duren original in '03. What a recording. I think Van regrets some details like the synth. Nay, that synth is perfect, like everything else. If you don't believe Van was the singer to beat in this period, here's what I'll play you: "I told them it wasn't so"—ripping enough—but then there's the lumber-chipping horsepower when that refrain returns as "I turned on the *raadiioo";* not for listeners with a history of dizziness.

"I Need to Know" Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers
It only took one song from the sophomore *You're Gonna Get It* to prove the classic TP debut wasn't a one-off, and hey, only one song does! But what a beaut; still his best song since the debut. "Who would have thought that you'd fall for his line?/All of a sudden it's me on the outside" rings awfully true.

"You Can't Put Your Arms Round a Memory" Johnny Thunders
I don't think everyone in the room was clear on whether "can't" or "arms" is the one count. Not a problem if you're also forgetting that you already rhymed "try" and "why" just one line ago. An all-star lineup leverages this (seriously) very fine composition to make the tricky case for the ex-Doll stick. Where credit: I wouldn't be hip to Thunders were it not for Ms. Donnette Thayer.

"Promises" Buzzcocks
What fun: the Buzzcocks reclaimed the concept of a "singles band," producing singles every couple of months with great sound and great graphics. This one was my favorite.

"There's No Way Out of Here" David Gilmour
The best Pink Floyd song that never was actually originated as a composition by a band called Unicorn, whose version puts in sharp relief how much the sometimes unprepossessing Gilmour can radiate star quality. Although credit Ken Baker with doing downer lyrics right ("There are no answers here/When you look out, you don't see in") at a time when Roger was losing his battle with existentialism.

"Surrender" Cheap Trick
One of the jewels in the crown of power pop, this funny pile-driver about deciding your parents are weird was eclipsed in the public eye by the freak success of "I want *you*…to want…*me"* live at Budokan—relegating it to a place alongside other under-the-radar Cheap Trick treasures from the first three albums, like "Daddy Should Have Stayed in High School" and "Southern Girls."

"The Big Country" Talking Heads
One of Brian Eno's most triumphant productions, *More Songs about Buildings and Food* is the second-best album of '78, sporting one of history's best all-around bass guitar performances by Tina Weymouth. The way she draws out a cinematic impression is remarkable; I've always wondered how much the members contributed arrangementwise, and why they brought in the ringers in '80. Anyway, "The Big Country" has a couple of notable Tina tricks, like the clipped 1 followed by the sustained 2; I never would have come up with that good an idea. The song's impact grows on you, with its naturalistic and apparently bemused description of the human *civitas* observed from 30,000 feet, followed by the opaque pronouncement, "I wouldn't live there if you paid me to." I don't take this as misanthropy

so much as expressing the impulse not to go along with something you have no choice but to go along with.

"Public Image" Public Image Ltd.
As hard as it was in 1978 to top the Pistols, this almost does. The high, harmonizing rhythm guitar is an intensely musical innovation, the production made the world safe once again for tons of reverb, and Lydon's singing is better than ever. It gives the impression of a passion indifferent to technique, but do in fact listen to the technique on a line like, "Public image, you got what you wanted"; the plaint and vibrato are right there at any moment when they need to be.

"Just What I Needed" The Cars
I'll always remember Laurie Hicklin's very generous gift of this album when I was a band teen. This is my favorite Roy Thomas Baker production; he was notorious for recording everything in the red, muttering black magic about odd order distortion products that I have no reason to doubt is a completely legit part of why he was getting the best sound out there. The pro-all-the-way Cars bring just the right aired-out arrangement for this, keeping it mostly a small combo affair with only the occasional *Night at the Opera* vocal cluster traipsing past like a Greek chorus.

"Be Stiff" Devo
After the Beatles, I think the most intense band fandom I've ever experienced was for Devo in 1978. I was grudgingly intrigued by the "Jocko Homo" single, followed with increased interest through the *Are We Not Men?* album, and saw what I believe is the best live show I've ever seen when they played the tiny U.C. Davis coffeehouse that fall. I figured they'd be arty and amateurish to a degree. They were so utterly tight, loud, wound-up, and confrontational that it was like being hit by a bus. The later hit "Whip It" doesn't begin to capture the peak offering of musicianship, graphics, aesthetics, and cultural mayhem of which they had their day as masters. Eno's razor-sharp production on "Be Stiff" is the best record of the sheer unexpected power they wielded. Obviously this is amazing guitar work, but the real standout element is Alan Myers's drumming: the most seamless shifting between half-time and double-time I think I've ever heard.

"Tiny Steps" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
They created the mighty *This Year's Model,* they threw in "Radio, Radio" in case "there's no reason to play" something else in your country, and they're not even tired. The B-side of "Radio Radio" is the stupendous "Tiny Steps," with its crashing waves of indictment of abusive relationships. The *Taking Liberties* detritus release in 1980, on which this was collected, holds up as well as most top artists' best albums. I'm bending the rules to give E.C. two songs in '78; it feels like not enough.

“Nightime” Big Star

Recorded in 1974, the third Big Star album has to be the most disorienting result ever to come out of a recording project. With its ostensibly lavish arrangements and the involvement of such participants as Steve Cropper and Jim Dickinson, it had the air of an inattentive investment of someone else’s money. With Alex Chilton’s narcotic vocals floating through the vastness of heaven and hell, the subjects are oddly everyday for never seeming too far from ecstasy, death, murder, hopelessness. “Nightime” is a captivatingly beautiful snapshot of getting dressed for an evening out with someone who is then seized with anxiety: “Get me out of here/I hate it here/Get me out of here.” That perfect dramatic clarity plays against the dreamily blissful chorus of “Caught a glance in your eyes/And fell through the skies.” As a whole, it takes your breath away.

“Baker Street” Gerry Rafferty

That rapturous sax line, which was played by someone named Raphael Ravenscroft, could be said to have singlehandedly put saxophone back in the picture for lyric music, having previously drifted with Tom Scott into a sort of lifestyle-integration territory. Picking up where the excellent Stealers Wheel left off, Rafferty seems to have been trying to cram as many instruments and arrangement touches as humanly possible into the recording: besides the sax and Hugh Burns’s blistering guitar solo, I’m thinking I’m hearing piano, Wurlitzer, accordion, bongos, flute, those little hanging chimes by the drum kit… how does it all hang together? But it does. “You used to think that it was so easy/But you’re trying, you’re trying now” is the centerpiece line to an easygoing demolition of the rambling and irresponsible urban dreamer who is the listener and possibly also the speaker of the lyric’s message. The lyrics offer a capably rendered if knowingly routine species of disillusionment; it’s the music alone that suggests the possibility of rising out of it. I’m not sure it wouldn’t be this song if I knew I could only listen to one more.

1979

"Loneliness" Horslips
What a great song—an album my roommate in college used to play all the time. I played him some Jethro Tull (that also had some Irish folk influence) to reciprocate; nothing against Tull, but he was younger and not a musician, and I remember after that thinking wow, I shouldn't go around thinking I have better ears than people. Nineteen seventy-nine was a really good year for one-offs; everyone had now had a chance to get good at integrating *new wave* to make their one move.

"Let's Go" The Cars
In a way, the Cars operated as if they were making cars. The model for the new year was clearly based on the model for the previous year, with a few adjustments clearly designed to account for recent trends. I liked that about them—I just thought they started not doing it that interestingly in the eighties. "Let's Go" was the "Just What I Needed" of *Candy-O:* Ben Orr vocals, synthesizer hook, bursts of Queen-like Roy Thomas Baker vocal clusters. I thought it was very pleasantly sexy talk about the girl with the wonderful eyes and risqué mouth, and the night life, baby.

"Cruisin'" Smokey Robinson
This occupied an MOR limbo it wasn't easy for me to notice, but it's a luscious and tremendously sophisticated recording. The minor-third-down chord change on "love" in "I love it when we're cruising together" has some specialness that I can't put my finger on, that I think of as critical to pop in my lifetime and that I credit Smokey with inventing. It's a cousin of the change on "me" in "My mama told me you better shop around."

"Corpus Christi" The Avengers
Is that opening riff in 10/4 or what? The biting guitar and vocals of this anti-Christian punk rock rant barely disguise its worthiness to appear on, maybe, Steely Dan's *Can't Buy a Thrill.* "In the beginning there was a void except for the written word" is probably supposed to point to the inanity of what you get in something like John's gospel, and I like the willingness to stand up and say the emperor is naked, but it can be sadly incumbent on someone like me to offer the perspective that something like "In the beginning was the Word" is not a creationist move, it's a poetic riff on existing scripture (Genesis), and a way of expressing that human destiny is atemporally embedded in the forming of the universe. Okay, don't ask me why I say things like that, it just comes out. To sum up: "Corpus Christi": love it.

"Dancing Barefoot" Patti Smith Group

And speaking of dying for somebody's sins. I always have to pinch myself to remember that Patti was a freakin' hitmaking machine for a while in the "Because the Night" days. This one screams Todd and should have been even bigger than it was.

"In the Evening" Led Zeppelin
Presence was the first Zeppelin album that sounded like it was trying more than it was succeeding, and *In Through the Out Door* feels frankly like it somehow doesn't quite have it together anymore. Although I like many things about it. Stunner of a riff here, and one of the coolest couple of seconds in recorded music is that falling-down-stairs percussive string sound as the solo starts up.

"Refugee" Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers
Tom Petty put together the most dependable straight rock franchise bridging the seventies and the nineties. This isn't really even a better song than "I Need to Know," but now something about the production is just high-dollar enough to get people into stadiums.

"Five Foot One" Iggy Pop
This was the first release after the phenomenal *Lust for Life*. It's rocking, funny, clever, and I like the horn riff a lot. Is it the city's ripped back sides and the winding ocean drive and all of it is made for you and me? That it isn't.

"Comfortably Numb" Pink Floyd
The Wall was my first crushing disappointment in Pink Floyd. I was still in denial of the level of banal spitefulness Roger Waters was capable of even in the face of evidence like "Pigs" on *Animals* ("Ha ha, charade you are"?). I kind of liked Bob Ezrin going in, and Gerald Scarfe seems talented, but put them and Roger all together, and they add up to a sort of sad-clown-painting rock. Which, I realized when I cooled down, had its moments. "When I was a child, I caught a fleeting glimpse.… I cannot put my finger on it now" is the sentimental side of Floyd at its best, setting up, then staying out of the way of a delicate feeling. If what they couldn't put their finger on turned out to be that all the world's problems can be traced to protective mothers and public education, there's your case for playing coy.

"Laugh and Walk Away" The Shirts
This sounds like it could have been some 1961 East Village folk record sped up a little and overdubbed by Manzanera and Ferry—that pounding piano that gives everyone a headache except me. Except that the words are nothing special, this is one of the first things I'd point people to for outstanding obscurities of this era.

"They Don't Know" Kirsty MacColl

Kirsty MacColl's stop-start music career, which ended in her tragic death, hit a couple of dizzying heights, the first of which was the Stiff single "They Don't Know" (Tracey Ullman released a more polished, nearly as excellent hit version). It's the sort of not-quite-simple pop song that gives you the immediate impression that there are people like Kirsty, who when they write a few romantic lines, effortlessly summon the full immensity of music's power to charm, and then there are the rest of us, who get a little of it right after great labor.

"Powderfinger" Neil Young
That just-turned-22-year-old who yells "Look out mama there's a white boat coming up the river" is one of the most artfully drawn characters in song. On casual listen, he's just a hick; on closer listen, Neil lobs just the right amount of a *what an idiot* edge his way to ratchet sympathy for him up all the more. Love that harmony guitar.

"Roxanne" The Police
I walk around thinking I could take or leave the whole rest of the recording except for the chorus backing vocals doing the "Roxanne, Roxanne" harmonies—which I'm nuts for. But really the whole rest of the recording is the perfect set-up.

"Big Boys" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
The relatively grandiose *Armed Forces* was a little dissipated after the razor-sharp *This Year's Model,* but there's a new streak of regret that adds a dimension of perspective. Besides the grabber opening—"I am starting to function in the usual way"—there are in fact only a couple of exceptional lyric lines in "Big Boys": "She'll be the one…that you wish you'd held on to," "You tried so hard to be like the big boys." They're more than enough to triangulate an insight with a real ache to it.

"Local Girls" Graham Parker and the Rumour
I've been known to wonder what all the fuss is about Graham Parker, but not when it comes to "Local Girls," which absolutely floors me. His delivery—maybe somewhere between Elvis Costello and Donald Fagen—carries the proceedings. "Hey—you look all right in that cheap green dress/But every time you swish it round you make me disappear" is a mouthful, but manages to walk a line between put-down and outreach. "Discovering Japan" is pretty undeniable, too.

"Life Begins at the Hop" XTC
I don't recall in detail what level of attention I paid before, but this was when I first broke out in a sweat for both XTC and producer Steve Lillywhite. Colin's "Life Begins at the Hop" is one of those immortal guitar lines and one of the best pure pop songs ever. Andy's "Helicopter" is a very close second.

"My Sharona" The Knack
Get the Knack was another record that same college roommate—Jon something?—used to play. I started those proceedings too hip to listen to the mere Knack—I think part of my corruption as a gullible teen at the hands of the insight-free late-seventies *Rolling Stone* magazine—and got won over. Every song on that thing is great. Just at the level of being scarily good musicians, but also the level of non-stop musicality and mini-inventiveness. "My Sharona" is a national monument. It would be hard to praise that octave hook enough. It's not like any octave pattern is a hook. You could try for months and not get something with just the right repetition of anticipations to immediately move your body.

"It's Different for Girls" Joe Jackson
Part of this beautiful song's considerable appeal is that you never quite know where you stand. Except that, with the absolute no-reverb production, you feel like you're standing right next to *something.* The rawest possibility hinted at is desperate loneliness ("Then again, don't end up on the shelf"), the most callous a dismissal of one more failure at romantic connection ("You're all the same"). It's not clear, for one thing, whether it's Joe saying girls are all the same, or the girl telling Joe *his* kind are all the same. It all manages to conjure a state of mind so believable and painful, it's as if we all know we wouldn't want to look directly at it. "I know a lot of things that you don't/You want to hear some?"—that's really powerful to me.

"Dance This Mess Around" The B-52's
What a creation this is. The feelings one gets from this are all over the map, all intense. Like most B-52's, it succeeds as comedy—of the parody of kitsch variety—but it's also fairly straight drama *and* surrealism. In an odd way it shares with Patti Smith's brilliant and harrowing "Land" a visitation of dance description songs for disorienting effect, but plays that for fun. And in juxtaposition to the mind-bending "Why don't you dance with me?" section! Just to not have that part come off as obnoxious is worthy enough but to have it be both funny and genuinely touching is remarkable.

"Map Ref. 41'N 93'W" Wire
There were only vague hints that Wire were one day going to be capable of music this ravishing. "Outdoor Miner" maybe? Better yet, it's a great sound built from unlikely materials: squelching, modulated synths, disembodied riffs, Colin Newman's uningratiating reading. I don't recognize any particular narrative, just an ominous evocation of loss associated with the way some land is being subjected to mapping of its borders. The mood struck initially is not much more than irksome, a mood to play on the word "rule"—"an unseen ruler defines…an unrulable expanse of geography"—but the effects become more grave: "beneath the rule a country hides." By the end, "a deep breath of submission has begun." Off the top of my head, the best piece of art rock.

1980

"The World's a Mess, It's in My Kiss" X
1980 was probably the last pivotal music year except for 1991. Things didn't go from fun and rocking to not and not, like on January 1st in *Boogie Nights,* but something about that aspect of the movie sure got a strong "yep" from me. The eighties were chilling, sobering—AIDS, the death of John Lennon, Joy Division and Factory Records, and the death of Ian Curtis. It had started to feel like punk and new wave didn't quite work anymore, but a lot of good stuff happened. Bands were casting around, and it felt like there should be a next great thing, it just wasn't there yet. Uh, ska? X seemed a little three years ago, with the punk names and the X's, like, had Los Angeles been thinking the whole thing over all this time? This song sounds fantastic to my ears today, especially the Ray Manzarek organ, and John Doe's resonant and complex singing, of which Exene's voice is something like a secret ingredient.

"That's Entertainment" The Jam
This is very lovely—much more musical than the Jam usually sound; I wonder: is that the key to its Morrissey certification, or is it the lyrics? It took a long time for it to bug me that I didn't quite know what the lyrical point here was. I suppose it's sort of, "Real life—that's *my* entertainment." There's something quaintly twentieth century about that—entertainment was a kind of god, hypostatic. Who's getting the "kick in the balls" could matter less than the sheer richness of the fabric of life. Nowadays that's no longer poetry, it's YouTube.

"Sister Europe" The Psychedelic Furs
Wow, that Steve Lillywhite snare sound screams "eighties." As with most certifiably forward-looking developments, the Furs gave some impression of being the opposite: "psychedelic" meant out-of-date, right? The reverb and the (winningly sharp) sax were happening Brit things, but they still read as ghostly apparitions along with the "stupid" Steinway and Charles Aznavour. I saw them live; they were incredible.

"I Got You" Split Enz
"I don't know why sometimes I get frightened"—that is one classic chorus. I don't know the whole Finn brothers history, but frequently enough I hear something remarkable from their early seventies cabaret prog period. The terse, mechanical vocal delivery here typifies the later new wave style of hitmakers like the Cars and Devo. This is a more inspired composition than anything on *Freedom of Choice,* though "Gates of Steel" comes close.

"Sheba" Mike Oldfield

This perfectly gorgeous, rather New Agey melody from the guy who did the theme from *The Exorcist* is sung in what may be some exotic language but I would not be shocked to learn is someone's good faith attempt to write a song in actual baby talk, like "Neegy Noggy Noo." The number of people I've played this for and had love it is, well, zero, but I'm no closer to backing down.

"The Great Curve" [edit] Talking Heads
Remain in Light was vastly influential; I never heard the words "world beat" before that album. I was a little disappointed, myself. I've heard they went into the studio with no songs, and that would go a long way toward explaining why I didn't hear any songs. This may in fact have been *the* record to convince the world it didn't need songs—maybe this and "Rapper's Delight." That's refreshingly paradigm-shifting and all, but close enough to "out of ideas" to bode a long sustainability crisis. "Once in a Lifetime" is intriguing and gets all the airtime; "The Great Curve" has the most musical resonance, with its folk, blues, Spanish, and African overtones. This is also the best and wildest Adrian Belew guitar solo on record. It's simply staggering.

"Requiem" Killing Joke
They reminded me of Black Sabbath—people in such a dark mood they spontaneously invent a variety of heavy metal. These are folks who actually believed nuclear holocaust was coming any day (not to suggest that in 1980 that was delusional). I think this is my favorite heavy, sinister guitar riff ever.

"Wicked Gravity" Jim Carroll Band
Jim Carroll was already pretty famous because of the *Basketball Diaries,* so it was a little tricky to listen to this album, both because I was wondering if a poet trying to think and act like a singer was resulting in something forced, and because I was wondering if it would be an embarrassing trotting around of his misspent youth as a marketing move. "Wicked Gravity" may even be a little bit about that in lines like "It's where silence can teach me to sing" and "They think the pearls I wear are pills." But besides the fact that this is good rock music, he could clearly innovate at the level of the delivery—bending notes into the glides of speech, repeating the middle words of couplets for emphasis like, "My guardians quit, they *quit* before they started their search."

"Watching the Wheels" John Lennon
Lyrically, this is John at his contentious, outside-the-box best: he's out of the world of trying to validate himself in the arena of fame, and he invites us to join him. Musically, Jack Douglas's unfocused production makes it an uphill struggle for *Double Fantasy*, but "Watching the Wheels" shines through. Yoko's "Walking on Thin Ice" was actually pretty good, too.

“Eugene” Essential Logic
Nineteen eighty was a big year for saxophone, with plenty of thanks going to Lora Logic and Essential Logic. This is a fantastic, dense sound, with spectacularly adventurous harmonic intervals and chord progressions. It’s really no less than genius that it all hangs together so well. The words seem to be one of those near–sci-fi indictments of the human species; I believe I hear the line “you never earned your fossil fuels.” The vocals have a peculiar throaty quality that I find refreshing and strangely appropriate to the subject matter.

“Stomping All Over the World” Kimberley Rew
Fresh from the Soft Boys, with a pop directness and no fear of confrontation (check out “Hey War Pig”), Kimberley Rew came on like a big indie force, and surprised the world with the megahit-capable Katrina and the Waves. “I’ll go stomping all over the world/Just to get back to my blue eyed girl” is about as perfectly as you can do simple, fat-as-hell analog era pop rock.

“Up the Neck” Pretenders
“I rubbed my face in the sweat that ran down his chest/It was all very run of the mill/But I noticed his scent started to change somehow/His face went berserk and the veins bulged on his brow/I said, ‘baby, ah sweetheart.’” That’s an amazingly disturbing and well-dramatized passage from “Up the Neck,” one of a few great songs from the Pretenders’ classic Chris Thomas–produced debut. I was torn between this and “Precious,” which also has high-impact dramatic crescendos. That’s more of a rocker, but this is the best Chrissie Hynde ever was at working an almost easy listening soul territory for the purpose of sharing and humanizing emotions of distress.

“Noise in This World” The English Beat
There were other aspects than “world beat” to a general taste for rhythmic quirkiness that flourished in 1980—it pains me to leave off “Fa Cé-la” from *Crazy Rhythms* by the Feelies—and the highest profile beat du jour was ska, which has kept resurfacing every couple of years ever since. “Mirror in the Bathroom” was the hit, but my favorite was the bold, modern-jazz–tinged “Noise in This World.” The melody on “crossed-out names in your address book” is from another planet, and I love the weird harmony sax outbursts.

“Kingdom of Love” The Soft Boys
The horror-movie garage rock of *Underwater Moonlight* came right out of nowhere, and took some time to find an audience—but eventually did, thanks to the extremely insightful folks at London’s *Bucketfull of Brains* magazine, my early eighties music bible. The teasing twin guitars of “Kingdom” are too good to ignore, but there are many other stunning and diverse moments, e.g., the crazed build-up of “Insanely Jealous” or the chiming Vincent Price peculiarity of the B-side “Strange.”

"New Amsterdam" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
Another eighties thing: reverb—okay again. I couldn't deal with the dream-state Stax soul of *Get Happy!!* at first. I just thought E.C. should quit with the play-acting and do whatever was supposed to come after new wave. Sound like a confused opinion? You should have heard the music I was trying to make myself. Anyway, I worship *Get Happy!!* now, and I've figured out he just needs to stretch himself a lot, so let him, but the first song I took to was the seductive "New Amsterdam." Another thing I learned to just go with was the lyric sets made up entirely of figures of speech; there's a certain illumination to be revealed there—a sort of, "See—this is what people were originally talking about when that cliché was born!"

"Can't Make Love" Wall of Voodoo
And another eighties thing: drum machine. There were the Young Marble Giants ("Final Day": another omission I regret), I forget who else. It got me to thinking if I couldn't hold a band together, there was always that—even tried to make it work, contributing to the usually painful music I made in 1980. Anyway, no one did it better than Wall of Voodoo. Steve Wynn and I went to see Wall of Voodoo and Gun Club at the Whiskey at about this time, coming away with polar opposite opinions about which band was good. Stan Ridgway was hilarious, and the three-synth onslaught had an otherworldly, brain-buzzing power. "I'm a nice guy but I don't love you/I just want to sleep with you" delivered as one of Stan's wiseacre Will Rogers asides is so unexpected it lands halfway between critique and disclosure.

"Black and White" The dB's
Chris Stamey's B-side "Soul Kiss" grabbed me first: "Yes, your party dress/It was my obsession/Now I'm impervious to that/It's your soul kiss, that's what I miss." I think that was my very first marveling at the devilry with words and music that was Chris's gift. But "Black and White" is in its own way just as nervy, and arguably the first college rock classic. The string arpeggio style has to have been formative for Pete Buck. Drummer Will Rigby and bassist Gene Holder do amazing work here, too.

"Rescue" Echo and the Bunnymen
I don't follow British influence genealogy with any authority, but it sure seems like Ian McCulloch had completely developed the U2 style by the time I heard it from anyone else, like U2. That was the cred with which I decorate what is already the chorus hook of the decade that is, "Won't you come on down to my/Won't you come on down to my rescue." The bass is threatening to be too busy, but wins the gamble with a tough, uningratiating bark to the otherwise thin sound, leaving power in reserve to fuel the payoff moments.

"Tell Me When My Light Turns Green" Dexy's Midnight Runners

If the art of record production slipped in the eighties, don't blame Pete Wingfield's pistol-hot production of *Searching for the Young Soul Rebels.* This song wasn't as well known as "Geno," which in turn wasn't as well known as "Come On, Eileen," but it's the one. Built around one of the all-time best sax riffs, it features a decidedly weird, yelpy vocal from Kevin Rowland that is actually a fairly amazing technical achievement. He has a lot to say, too; his internal dialog spills over into memorable album credit interjections like "Old clothes do not make a tortured artist"—which ironically complements the Smiths-inventing duotone archive photo graphic of a youth with bags packed as people hustle into a street.

"Love Will Tear Us Apart" Joy Division

"Love Will Tear Us Apart" cuts immediately to the core truth of relationship distress: "When routine bites hard and ambitions are low, and resentment rides high." With some of the hardest R's since Johnny Cash, Ian Curtis sounded American, inviting a Jim Morrison comparison even beyond that of Curtis's untimely death. With the likes of "Atrocity Exhibition," he had soon enough established an unchallenged reputation as *the* darkest lyricist going, and it was not a play-acted dark, but immediate, accurate, unembellished, and shared unflinchingly. "Why is the bedroom so cold, turned away on your side/Is my timing that flawed, our respect run so dry?" Only after "Love Will Tear Us Apart" is it obvious how clumsily breakup songs ordinarily try to get at the point, when the point is simple: resentment riding high; respect run dry. *24 Hour Party People* has it that the drums were recorded on the roof of the studio; whatever the case, the drums and the drum sound are awe-inspiring. The snare/tom intro, rolling in with those big acoustic chords, is immense. Martin Hannett's production is uncanny; you always hear the word "spare," but the way the bass and keyboards hint around the chords without too much commitment is a matter of rare delicacy. (And you would hear that 16th-note hi-hat pattern everywhere after this.) Ian's is a heart that speaks in plain language across the gulf of death: resist resentment; find respect.

1981

"TV Party" Black Flag
The year 1981 fired off the first salvos of eighties annoyance. The most deadly was the "New Romantic" movement, where the romance was with drum machines, thin, washy synthesizers, grandiose, brayed vocals, bad hair, and bad clothes. It was a terrible music year, and made me realize that I was capable of caring about hair and clothes fashion, when it was this bad. All of that was mostly a British thing. In the U.S., the myth that punk bands were just rock bands that couldn't play their instruments had spread around enough to start coming true, in the form of the "hardcore" and L.A. punk scenes. As this list will attest, that loose genre wasn't *uniformly* a sullen, undisciplined, and mobbish celebration of hate over love, but it must hold the world record. "TV Party" is one kind of important exception: it wasn't sullen. The lesson of Henry Rollins is probably that with a sufficiently engaging personality, the issue of technical merit will eventually take care of itself.

"Help Me Somebody" Brian Eno and David Byrne
As with a number of 1981 selections, I'm not a hundred percent sure I even like this one, but I listened to it a lot at the time, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* would be a good candidate for the most influential record of the subsequent twenty-five years—inspiring a host of more recent musical developments I'm not even fifty percent sure I like.

"Under Pressure" Queen and David Bowie
This isn't anything like a journey through several barely compatible song ideas that ties them all up brilliantly or anything, but just the audacity of journeying through several barely compatible song ideas submitted as a supergroup hit single is boisterous and refreshing. "Love dares you to care for the people on the edge of the night" wants a little reeling in, but is a characteristic piece of Bowie (I'm guessing) right-headedness.

"Birds of Paradise" Pretenders
When Chrissie Hynde goes soft, it's usually in a diminished chord, slow tremolo singing kind of way, not anything this sing-songy. I like the sing-songy; this is a fetching piece of intimacy about lost childhood ideals, with a particularly nice bass part.

"Super Freak" Rick James
The tight, punchy, unforgettable riff of "Super Freak" is no less an instant signifier for nightlife adventurousness now than the day it was released. Not my scene—I feel sort of the embarrassed Amish patriarch in the presence of its playa majesty—but, job well done!

"On, On, On, On" Tom Tom Club
Maybe exacerbated by digital reverb being so new and coveted, the sonic malady of 1981 tended to be muddy low-mids, and (sometimes, but not here) too much high treble, like 10k. This sort of has that sound—more so than the giant hit "Genius of Love." But it has a marching, children's crusade melodiousness that wakes my ears up quite a bit.

"White Girl" X
"I'll replace your drunk old man/Sit in the parking lot and hold your hand." I don't really get what about this is "white girl," except that there's a deromanticizing impulse in the romantic lyric choices that X may view somewhat humorously as a ghettoized phenomenon—like people who refer to themselves as "white trash." A little more tonally dark and varied than the L.A. punk debut (which definitely had its moments), this is a great, dramatic vocal performance from John and Exene.

"Love" Robyn Hitchcock
Tuneful and stealthily deep, "Love" kept the ball rolling for the amazing Robyn Hitchcock outside of the Soft Boys' realm. Ghosts, animal deaths due to man's irresponsibility, Weetabix: it all adds up to consciousness-raising if you give it a chance.

"For Beauty's Sake" Marianne Faithfull
Even better than *Broken English,* the lovely "For Beauty's Sake" addresses the object of unrequited love, getting a lot across in few words, like, "In your circle you hold supreme sway." Am I shallow for wondering: Jagger? "What are you taking for beauty's sake?" is by itself an oddly compelling refrain.

"Johnny's Gonna Die" The Replacements
Here's another exception to the objectionableness of the "hardcore" genre: a group that could really play. And they'd better have some chops, ragging as they do on the chops of one "Johnny" (am I shallow for wondering: Thunders?). "Johnny always needs more than he takes/Forgets a couple chords, forgets a couple breaks" is winningly frank in its nerve. Pretty sophisticated chord textures going on here.

"From a Whisper to a Scream" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
I guess this is about accelerated infatuation, especially when drunk. Apparently "the one over the eight" is, in England, the drink that gets you drunk. Glenn Tilbrook sounds great on this Stax-if-not-Doobie-Brothers-inspired duet.

"Confrontation" Romeo Void
One of San Francisco's biggest deals at the time was Romeo Void, one

of whose secret weapons besides vocalist Debora Iyall was saxophonist Ben Bossi. This dance-friendly number is a painfully open confession of someone's uniquely personal dysfunction: "What works for you don't always work for me."

"Waiting on a Friend" The Rolling Stones

"Start Me Up" is a fine song, but "Waiting on a Friend" is by far the significant achievement of *Tattoo You.* For one thing, you pretty much have to be the Stones to be able to phone up Sonny Rollins to play your sax solo, so bless them for doing so, and it's a gem of an appearance. Also, this is Jagger at his lyrical best. All the lines are good, but "I'm not waiting on a lady/I'm just waiting on a friend" in isolation has a maturity and gentleness that is genius.

"Nobody Told Me" John Lennon

Hard to know where to situate this. It was finally released in '83, but three years after he died is weird placement. The cut is as frustrating as it is impressive, because it shows Lennon's Promethean spark returning. *Double Fantasy* was a fine album for lucidly enumerating his values as father and husband, but "Nazis in the bathroom," and "Always something cooking and nothing in the pot," and a passage or two of five-star songcraft—that's late-Beatles-level stuff.

"We Got the Beat" The Go-Go's

Another placement conundrum. I like the 1980 indie single better, but 1981 is a lot more needy. I guess I'm okay with the bigger production. I sure do miss that little answer vocal: "They're walking in time" *"They're walking in t…"* "They got the beat." What possessed them to axe that? One day I'm going to use ProTools to somehow isolate that from the single and add it back in. That will show them.

"Say Hello, Wave Goodbye" Soft Cell

Oh, about the complaining I did about New Romantic stuff? This one gets a free pass. People love this song or they hate it, and I absolutely love it. It's not exactly an ironic exercise, but certainly there's a value to opening with, "Standing in the doorway of the Pink Flamingo crying in the rain" that isn't strictly a flood of shared emotion. It's a sort of magic level of camp that allows the song to have it both ways, both lyrically and musically. The music is as certifiably beautiful as the production is kitschy; the story of cutting it off with a trampy and embarrassing lover is played for laughs at times, but moments like, "We're strangers meeting for the first time, okay?/Just smile and say hello" have a dramatic facility that makes me really aware of the other person's heart getting broken here. Some of the singing goes painfully out of tune at the end—just part of the charm.

"That's When I Reach for My Revolver" Mission of Burma

This Boston scene staple is significant to me as representing the dawn of the era of Dan Vallor's influence on my tastes, exposing me to then-

obscure material that accompanied me to becoming, to my limited extent, something of an insider in the biz for a while. Mission of Burma's stock has risen steadily since, to the point where Mission of Burma can now tour successfully on their reputation. The way I take this very curious set of lyrics is that our culture of self-actualization ("father taught us boundaries beyond which we must go," "the spirit fights to find its way") subtly teaches that when you have to choose between yourself and others, your duty is to prevail. So people go around ready to reach for their revolver. That is, I think the song is against reaching for your revolver. Sadly, not a given in the music business of my adult lifetime.

"Tearjerkin'" The dB's

Nothing was sadder than watching the dBs' Swiss-watch-precision sense of the progression of music history get lost on a generation that just wanted to dress like Adam and the Ants. "Tearjerkin'" sounded like every cool record from the past rolled into one. The beat is a sort of souped-up "Be My Baby," there's Mysterians keyboard, some Beach Boys harmonies. Chris Stamey's lyrics of this era were at their most playfully disturbing: "You can take a photograph/Take another one of those/You can take off your clothes/Take the covers off the bed/But don't take back what you said." I think it's time for history to realize the dB's were *on kilter* and a whole lot else was off. (And also time for me to stop repeatedly underestimating the world's desire to dress like pirates.)

"Radio Free Europe" R.E.M.

The crown for writing the new song that all bands would want to cover was just sitting there, for a long time, waiting for someone to pick it up and wear it, and no one was. There were some punk-era candidates like "Roadrunner," "Blitzkrieg Bop," "God Save the Queen," "Don't Fear the Reaper," but they were all some combination of deal-breakingly artist-specific and not as easy to pull off as everyone started out thinking. Then along came "Radio Free Europe," a fantastic song that's not only playable after one listening, but: it doesn't matter that your singer doesn't know the words, because neither does anyone else in the world. "Wall to wall David Janssen/ Wall to wall David Janssen/Radio Free Europe!/Radio Free Europe!" gets it done. Or probably "Me catch the ship across the sea," for that matter. I'm the right age for one of my earliest memories to be those commercials for supporting Radio Free Europe where the Russian-speaking guy winds his way to a secluded DJ booth and announces the Drifters' "On Broadway" (hey, bet you can find that on YouTube now). And, now that I'm chatty, *another* childhood memory they tapped was a mesmerizing *Boys' Life* magazine article about sleep states such as R.E.M. in terms as poetic as archetypal Jungian and biblical dream imagery.

1982

“From the Air” Laurie Anderson
It wasn’t until about 1985 that the bad eighties vanquished the competing possibilities; in 1982, there were still options like the lavishly entertaining performance art rock of Laurie Anderson. With elements verging on stand-up comedy, jazz, techno, and weird science from the Exploratorium, she was a master of bridging private rumination and public spectacle—the show from this tour was one of the five best I’ve seen.

“Little Red Corvette” Prince
Another great but oddly isolated force in the eighties was Prince. Prince’s blockbuster resolution of the world into the primary components of sex, technology, and God was in many ways influential, but insistent on Prince *the person* as its focus and only authorized practitioner, and Prince wasn’t the autobiographical type. My conception of him was sort of a hologram, a back-formation from what he described intensely desiring. The very catchy “Little Red Corvette” was my first hint of all of that.

“Daydream” Leinst
I wouldn’t guess there are more than ten remaining copies of this mesmerizing little home recording in the world. It was on a fascinating cassette compilation called *The Other* (artist for track one: Jandek!), one of whose publishers, George Parsons, didn’t have the song anymore when, having long since misplaced my copy, I tracked him down. I couldn’t have heard this thing more than two times 25 years ago, but it clearly stuck in my head permanently. I was ecstatic to find it in a drawer at my parents’ house this year. It’s a pointedly (given the context) non-underground vocal harmony number somewhat along the lines of “All I Have to Do Is Dream” and is a perfectly captivating composition. “Leinst is Hank Lawson & Matt Brown”—that’s all I know. If the writers want to contact me, I’ll do my best to put out a cover version that this not be lost forever.

“Happenstance” The dB’s
Some significant percentage of my hope for music at the start of the eighties was pinned to the dB’s. In 1980, I’d made friends at college with Steve Wynn, later of the Dream Syndicate, and having heard my 1979 indie single, he played me Stamey and Big Star, somewhat shocked that I hadn’t heard any of that yet. It was the first time in my adult life I felt there existed an operative musical direction I wanted to be a part of. By 1982 the dB’s were putting out great, inventive, profoundly musical records, and the world wasn’t buying. The writing was on the wall.

"The Message" Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five
"The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" was the first hip-hop record I was excited about (wasn't much into the Sugarhill Gang), and after "The Message" I was all ears—not to much avail: I thought the genre deteriorated badly in the next several years. Besides the obvious lyrical appeal ("Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge" is immortal), the care that went into the network of little synth sounds and the subtle complexity of the beat are amazing. It seemed to have an immediate impact on the way other brainy funk people like David Byrne operated.

"White Wedding" Billy Idol
Keith Forsey's production is an example of good eighties sound: a little more precise and gated than before, but still rocking. I have the persistent impression of there being some sort of dark, ominous irony to the nice day for a white wedding, but besides the odd appearance of the word "shotgun," I think it might be pretty straight optimism.

"Africa" Toto
Liking a Toto song was unexpected, and what with the DX7 atmospheric signifiers and Kilimanjaro rising above the Serengeti, this was teetering. Ultimately there's a winning lack of any kind of timidity, resulting in a good sense of climax—a virtue sorely and perhaps ironically lacking in the oncoming age of Madonna.

"Save It for Later" The English Beat
The first time I played for a thousand people was opening for the English Beat in '82. Ranking Roger—very nice guy. The debut album had such a thematic impact that it's easy for others to get eclipsed, but *Special Beat Service* is really good, especially this off-kilter ninth-heavy clean guitar number with a straight, plosive rock beat.

"Suspended in Gaffa" Kate Bush
The Dreaming was probably Kate Bush's strongest album, and she seemed to fit right into the arty end of the eighties I could get behind, sharing some state with Laurie Anderson and XTC. In this phase of Kate Bush's career it's not unexpected for there to be a "she's nuts" impression after a verse or two—in this case it's sort of a child shrieking desire to "have it all" but feeling mired ("feet of mud" or, according to a web search I just did, caught in a web of gaffer's tape).

"Front Line" Stevie Wonder
This is a rather obscure song from the somewhat head-scratching *Stevie Wonder's Original Musiquarium,* but a devastating guitar rock exploration of disabled veteran disillusionment that should remind everyone that Stevie is never far from being able to whip out something incredible.

“More Than This” Roxy Music
The arctic beauty of *Avalon* was an unexpected and freakishly lucrative resolution to a misfiring half-a-decade from Roxy. Maybe not overall as good in my book as the 1977 Ferry solo *In Your Mind,* “More Than This” was a higher high point—edging out “Love Me Madly Again.” There’s a sadness in, I don’t know, Mackay and Manzanera not being wild animals anymore. But, certainly, hats off.

“Senses Working Overtime” XTC
This is perhaps the last moment in eighties pop when bigger was still better—when without the hissing 12k of a Lexicon digital reverb, it was not certain a studio was adequate to the production of music of standard listenability. Later in the eighties it became increasingly illegal to be arty and sound good. Not to pass personal judgment, but there was clearly such a thing as a market sector that gave a pass to *Psychocandy because* it was sonically problematic, and as a matter of dalliance, evaluated it as music. *English Settlement* was arty, but big, and good—the sonics were legitimately awesome.

“Dream Away” George Harrison
Some might know this best as the closing theme of *Time Bandits.* George had become used to communicating in a spiritual master mode, which I find highly enjoyable but appreciate introduces something of a Yoda factor—and there’s a weird rubbery texture to the production. Ultimately Harrison music of this vintage is so unbeholden to any for approval that it establishes its own island of catchiness and pithiness, with lines the like of “all you owe is apologies.”

“Wolves, Lower” R.E.M.
These last five songs had a powerful personal impact on me as I experienced my first real involvement in the music business. On the first occasion of getting Pete Buck sufficiently trapped in a room with me, I hit him up to teach me the open-string arpeggiation of “Wolves, Lower” (he cheerfully indulged me)—a key element in R.E.M.’s domination of indie guitar pop of the eighties. They practically single-handedly authored the school of no keyboards, no fuzz on the guitar, organic drumming, lyrics about fields. Michael Stipe emerged as pop’s best singer on *Chronic Town,* and as abstruse as they were, his lyrics bespoke a vast talent and a new dimension of paracultural reflectiveness.

“Beyond Belief” Elvis Costello and the Attractions
I was unshakable as an Elvis fan for life when this came out, but I had struggled a little with *Get Happy!!* (eventually to really love it) and even a little more with *Trust* (eventually liking it well enough but no more). I thought with “Beyond Belief” he rocketed back to unquestionable greatness. It’s such a bizarre composition. The major/minor shift is borderline uncomfortable. He already did too much with

the rapid-fire figures of speech, and this upped the ante considerably. Damned if it doesn't all click.

"Tell Me When It's Over" The Dream Syndicate
By the start of 1981, I had become convinced Steve had a terrific album in him, and we'd had some discussions about my producing it for him (the only eventual manifestation being a track from the "15 Minutes" release I engineered). It was a bit of a shock when he abruptly moved to Los Angeles and within months had the biggest buzz in southern California—with a sound that was oddly unlike what he and I had been toying with. A year into it, it became a facile critical response to call the Syndicate derivative of Lou Reed or Dylan, but at the time it all read to me as putting a stake in the ground for music he liked and that was not really being done with any commercial success by anyone. "Tell Me When It's Over" is a feast of gravelly, slashing, impolite guitar in service of a strangely lilting, affecting melody.

"Everywhere That I'm Not" Translator
From the jazzy, almost dissonant opening riff to the absolutely unforgettable chorus, this is one of music's most glaring should-be-classics. It got attention enough around San Francisco; would that David Kahne then had the clout to put 415 releases across. "You're in Tokyo, but I'm not/You're in Nova Scotia, but I'm not/Yeah, you're everywhere that I'm not." Take my word for it: wherever you are, you need to hear this song.

"Shelley's Boyfriend" Bonnie Hayes and the Wild Combo
Bonnie Hayes fronted an SF punk band called the Punts, but had a musical adeptness that outstripped the genre. She signed to Slash and put out the very enjoyable *Good Clean Fun;* since then I've lost track, except she has been fairly successful writing for other artists. Lyrically, "Shelley's Boyfriend"—a carry-over from the Punts—is a message to a younger girl to be herself in the face of bad influences; musically, it's one of the more brilliant exercises in restraint, and subtle but powerful variations on simple themes. The lines are longish, and there tend to be the setup lines, which hang on one note for a long time, and then payoff lines—the likes of "It was not all that she led him to believe it would be" that play on your not easily predicting where they're going to wrap up (the example of "my mother told me to pick the very best one" springs to mind). Apparently featured in the movie "Valley Girl"—about which I know nothing—it's a shining example of power and intelligence behind a veneer of simplicity.

1983

"Burning Down the House" Talking Heads
The eighties became what they were in 1983. You can hear the difference in the Dream Syndicate's "Still Holding On to You," a still-very-good song that's like 1982's "Tell Me When It's Over," but with eighties production: most of the world of feral and arcane studio sound obsession is simply gone in favor of a few new simple rules, the first of which is that there has to be a big gated-reverb snare. And the mix has to leave plenty of room for this snare; there can't be too much guitar. This is like saying you can't hang a painting in a room with an 800-pound gorilla, because it will distract from the gorilla. The aesthetic may trace to Peter Gabriel, whose excellent mix on "The Intruder" was too influential, and his supposed claim that many mixes have been wrecked by cymbals taken too seriously (I don't know if he really said that, but I can count on the fingers of one hand the mixes that have been wrecked by cymbals). Anyway, this is the world as occupied by bands like Talking Heads, the Cars, Devo, and any other new wave band seeking eighties survival, hence the historical inaccuracy of this sound being called the new wave sound. Authentic new wave had not much reverb, not much "space" in the mix, and bigger rhythm guitars. "Burning Down the House" makes good use of the change, and the extremely cool Robert Rauschenberg rotating transparency album art reduced my grousing about the permanent retirement of the band's seventies minimalist arrangement magic.

"You're My Favorite Waste of Time" Marshall Crenshaw
Maybe most prominent on the *Attack of the Killer Bs* album, this killer B of Everlyesque harmony pop with a just a hint of "Saturday Night Fever" is now available as an eighties-resistant home demo, which is my recording here.

"Synchronicity II" The Police
Does "Every Breath You Take" really strike people as surpassingly beautiful? I can find nothing to like about it. The whole *Synchronicity* album seems like not very good ideas dressed up in not very good sound—except for this song, whose little rhythm section details add up to a very interesting listen. Yet, don't quiz me on the ominous implication of the slimy creature in the Scottish lake stirring as "industrial" office workers have a bad day. Its foot is caught in one of those six-pack rings?

"Without You" David Bowie
Huge hit that it was, *Let's Dance* began the long, long era of every new Bowie album being touted as the best one since *Scary Monsters.* This song is wonderful, and it makes you realize that as expressionist as he had always been, he was capable of a degree of understatement whose last vestiges are still discernible here. As much as I like Adrian Belew's

guitar, Bowie shouldn't be allowed near him—or Reeves Gabrels. I think this is Earl Slick, who, like Mick Ronson, has plenty of personality but plays just enough and no more.

"It's About Time" True West
True West was formed by some passing acquaintances of mine including Russ Tolman and Gavin Blair, members of Dream Syndicate front-person Steve Wynn's ex-band the Suspects—but it was really Richard McGrath's supple, psychedelic guitar that woke up the ears, and helped make the so-called "paisley underground" a force for good in the period.

"Hand in Glove" The Smiths
"Hand in Glove" is almost alone as a worthwhile 1983 recording whose sound jumps unarguably out of the grooves. Johnny Marr could really do jangly in a way that wove a spell—wasn't just the same plodding, only treblier—and the harmonica lends an impressively musical and blues-neutral touch. Morrissey would struggle with production for years afterward.

"Run It" The Replacements
This is the Replacements package in a minute and some change: funny, catchy, transgressive center—"red light, red light, run it!"—casual but ambitious playing, excellent yelled vocals, little beer-party musical quotes that had "band that will never be that big" written all over them. But they fought the power and pretty much won.

"Going Down to Liverpool" Katrina and the Waves
Kimberley Rew, the talented, pixyish *other* guitarist from the Soft Boys, has had weird little periods of major industry clout, none more pronounced than when Katrina Leskanich belted his composition "Walking on Sunshine." Among his classics in my book is "Going Down to Liverpool," of which the Bangles did an excellent contemporary cover.

"Blister in the Sun" Violent Femmes
Weird how *everyone* likes this song. That's good, I guess. Legendarily discovered by Chrissie Hynde playing on the street and invited by her to open for the Pretenders on the spot, the Femmes threw in with human-level entertainment in the manner of delta blues, where acoustic instruments sound right at close quarters and without electronic aid, and storytelling displaces image-mongering.

"In a Big Country" Big Country
This is one of the better *big,* fist-pumping eighties productions; it just seems to have a high-stepping, passionate, outdoorsy, not-overly-bright appeal. I would have to account the Northern California region of the U.S. as a qualifying big country where dreams stay with you

like a lover's voice fires the mountainside, and I regret that shallow, high-dream-turnover people from small, flat countries cannot connect with this rich experience.

"Every Word Means No" Let's Active

"Every Word Means No" was my naive idea of a million-selling hit, and its lack of impact on any but indie circles contributed to my realization that I was getting into the music business at a time where I didn't have the slightest idea what people wanted or what they were thinking.

"One Hour ½ Ago" The Rain Parade

Paisley underground bands were properly from L.A., and one group of core practitioners was the Rain Parade, which contained future Mazzy Star members David Roback and Will Glenn. *Emergency Third Rail Power Trip* was probably the most certifiably trippy of the branded projects.

"Beauty and Sadness" The Smithereens

It's funny how at a time when Let's Active were making their guitar riff move, the Smithereens—one of the few acts to do big guitar riff business as late as 1986—were at this time playing their psychedelic card. I love the little turn on "Maybe you never belonged to me."

"My City Was Gone" Pretenders

This swamp guitar rocker reminds me a little of both Creedence and the Hollies of "Long Cool Woman in a Black Dress." It suffered the indignity of being Rush Limbaugh's radio show theme song, but with any luck the world will remember Chrissie's shock at the overdevelopment of her home state long after they've forgotten anything Rush said.

"The Real World" The Bangles

The most utterly pleasant vocal harmony group in years was a big paisley underground scene player. Those who know only "Eternal Flame" might be amazed at how inventive and together they were in their relative infancy.

"Shaking Through" R.E.M.

Murmur was huge. By inducing an entire college rock culture to go its way, it could plausibly be called the last bulwark against total, lasting Michael Jackson/Madonna industry domination. Michael Stipe practically single-handedly invented the possibility of being reflective and oblique, yet still getting a lot across and doing big box office. He didn't come right at you with social injustice in those days; he entered your consciousness via the passing shadows of telephone poles and disused word choices like "up the stairs and to the landing"—somehow with more immediate results. It's very hard to choose one

song (especially with “Radio Free Europe” already taken for 1981), but I’ve always found the nuanced modulation of “Shaking Through” to be moving, and “Could it be that one small voice doesn’t count in the world” to be one of Stipe’s most direct and moving lines. Or is it “doesn’t count in the room”?

“A Day in Erotica” The Three O’Clock

The actual inventor of the paisley underground was Michael Quercio, whose previous band the Salvation Army produced—completely out of nowhere—an album of revved-up psychedelic garage guitar numbers with the aura of real melodic skill. The *Sixteen Tambourines* album disillusioned some Nuggets fans, but represented an incredible flowering of Michael’s melodic facility and range. “Jet Fighter,” “Stupid Einstein,” and “And So We Run” are all gems, but “A Day in Erotica” is a full-blown art rock classic. The vocal cluster on “She will run for miles, run to you” rivals the Bangles.

“Jokerman” Bob Dylan

Rumored to have renounced Christianity and embraced Judaism, it was hard to pin down exactly which flavor of religious crank Dylan constituted on the mad prophesying of “Jokerman.” One of his last bell-clear vocals, the way he’s saying what he’s saying somehow rings true to me, and the tune rings true to me. I think he might be talking about some variation on how Jesus is perceived—maybe the world’s hostility toward someone embracing and passing on a radically prophetic message.

“Diane” Hüsker Dü

For a song to mean even more business than “Jokerman” is remarkable. I actually hesitate to play this song for any given person in any given social context because it’s so troubling. It’s a believable account of a rapist/murderer picking up a girl, which without any tasteless description fully captures the shocking nature of the event. It’s a Grant Hart song, but Bob Mould’s guitar avalanche carries much of the emotional message. In a way it’s a punky, and thus to a degree unprofessional, approach, yet achieves something of a monumental grandeur that plays against the rude banality of evil’s encroachment into civility. The eighties saw deterioration of serious subject matter into either gratuitous offensiveness played partially for humor, or grandiose overinflation, but Hüsker Dü found the perfect pitch early.

1984

"Do They Know It's Christmas" Band Aid
There's that DX7 bell sound—we'll be hearing more of that on our tour. I knew this had to be the opening song for 1984 and I spent some energy finding a copy. Why? Until it gets to the very respectable "Feed the world/Let them know it's Christmas time" part at the end, it's not really even good. The answer is that one can only say God bless them, but, rhetorically, what can one say of such a parade of Boys George and Simon Les Bons singing lines as bad as "the only water flowing is the bitter sting of tears"? I believe this is the first of those big mid-eighties charity projects like Live Aid, and probably the best; quality control went down from there. I remember literally thinking: a lot more people's hearts are in the right place these days—I shouldn't worry that much about music becoming horrible.

"Seven Seas" Echo and the Bunnymen
If it isn't that DX7 bell sound. And more stinging tears! I don't claim to know what's being said here, but there's a satisfying physicality to "my face among them, kissing the tortoise shell," and this is one of the Bunnys' several grand melodies.

"Fell from the Sun" Clay Allison
The precursor to Opal and Mazzy Star, this is David Roback doing the bold psych guitar with vocals from Kendra Smith, who before a mostly non-singing role in the Dream Syndicate was the lead singer with Steve Wynn in the band Suspects. This was one of those little islands of it seeming like the eighties were still getting going in a good direction. The lyrics have that strange gravity of facing some sort of new morning in a world where lostness is a given, nearly a comfort.

"Seven Chinese Brothers" R.E.M.
I'm inclined to take this as some sort of impressionistic dialog with traditions of antiquity, with the references to Chinese legend in the title, and "Wrap your heel in bones of steel" (is that like foot binding?). Arguably a slight and irresolute effort from R.E.M. compared with some *Murmur* material, it nevertheless bespeaks a gateway to considering longings and resolutions on a larger scale than the mind—at least the mind with modern limitations or perhaps with ancient limitations—can naturally fathom (seven thousand years to sleep away the pain).

"99 Luftballons" Nena
Possessing one of the best hooks of the eighties, it must be admitted that this song suffers from an embarrassingly out-of-place disco funk interlude, and the word "kriegsminister."

“Something Came Over Me” Chris Stamey
This long, elegantly rendered guitar and vocal piece seems to have been recorded live in a room in a house, at some distance, with understated synth accompaniment. Besides turning in an impassioned and formidably precise guitar performance, Chris positively raises the bar for capturing a rapturous moment outside of time with lines like, “We could see through the air like it was invisibly fine.”

“Rain Rain” X-Teens
“I love you/It’s easy ’cause you’re here” epitomizes the offhand proficiency of the X-Teens, a group I want to say in an entirely unjustifiable way strike me as an anticipation of My Bloody Valentine. The chord changes stroll confidently around unfamiliar territory in this entry from the golden era of Mitch Easter productions.

“Murder” David Gilmour
It could have been the track of the decade from the flamboyantly malfunctioning Pink Floyd: sturdy Celtic folk melody (at least, sturdy by the meager standards of anything off *The Final Cut),* affecting lyrics (“Did you get rid of all the voices in your head/Do you now miss them?”; “The red blood spread wider, like the anger you made”).

“Darby Hall” The dB’s
For the dB’s to make their move without the recently departed Chris Stamey seemed unlikely but not impossible; tracks like “Black and White” and “Big Brown Eyes” had proven that Peter Holsapple was really right there at all times. Led by “Love Is for Lovers,” *Like This* was very good—maybe not the grand slam that needed to happen to ignite some much-deserved commercial success this late in the branding. Yet, tucked away as a B-side was the sublime, reflective “Darby Hall,” with PH’s best lyrics, such as the near-desperate “We can buy time, buy an hour at a time/We can buy time by the hour.”

“Hero Takes a Fall” Bangles
All Over the Place was noonday for the Bangles: inspired covers of Kimberley Rew and Emitt Rhodes, perfect Hoffs/Peterson blending throughout. Had this been the album that sold, what might have been? I remember taking it as fact that these lyrics were about Steve Wynn, but I can’t recall any reliable source for that.

“The Million Year Picnic” Nash the Slash
Nash was a Ralph Records guy who apparently wore a mummy outfit and a fedora on stage. That’s about all I know. It’s a square-wave synth lover’s paradise—some of which I think is actually played on guitar—a little instrumental not unlike “Popcorn” by Hot Butter, but one that really soars.

"Pride (In the Name of Love)" U2
By the time of *War,* my reaction to U2 was stunned disbelief that they had become so overrated. Forget Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, *here* was some unearned pomposity. But sometimes things get better just by turning the dial up. "Pride (In the Name of Love)" was their first song that wasn't a musical mediocrity dressed up with the same guitar treatment as always, and it was in fact well above average (dressed up in a well-above-average variation on the same guitar treatment as always). Bono's singing was so overdone at all times it was difficult for me to even hear that he was an extraordinary singer, but throw Martin Luther King in front of his histrionics, and I was able to get it. (King's murder—an outrage: who knew?)

"This Could Be the Day" Robyn Hitchcock
"This could be the night I've waited for all my frumpy little life/This could be the night I cut a malignant growth with a steel knife": that's risky enough that you have to admire Robyn's willingness to up the ante of Robynness throughout the terrific and borderline nuts *I Often Dream of Trains.* Those are great lines in my book, and together with some perfectly placed harmonica, conjure some of the most authentic blues spirit in a critically blues-poor decade.

"Plateau" Meat Puppets
It's one of the unexpectedly quiet, slightly blue-grassy cuts off the already generally unexpected *Meat Puppets II.* The singer tells all about the plateau where everyone comes to use the bucket and mop that are there to tidy up the modest environs for the unexpected satisfaction of pitching in. The fingerpicking lingers a bit on a new chord. Then, pow: one of the most devastating sonic sea changes on record. It's pretty understated when you analyze what actually happens—I think just a cymbal hit, and a switch to an electric guitar doing a more exotic arpeggio through an effect like a Leslie speaker or flangey envelope follower, something like that. But the impact is like Dorothy opening the door to the full-color scene.

"Reel Around the Fountain" The Smiths
It's such a short distance from recognizing the importance of the Smiths to recognizing the potential for parodying Morrissey (I'm recalling some random premise for Gil Ray to imagine Easter With Morrissey: "slap me 'round the bunny cage…") that one has to sit soberly and record a few facts. First, he and Stipe are clearly the best two lyricists of the decade. Second, Johnny Marr is a genius: thankfully, no one has ever needed my help discovering that. "It's time the tale were told/Of how you took a child and you made him old" is wonderful, and one of the more auspicious album openers. And we know, because he said it twice.

"Grey Scale" Let's Active
As with "Darby Hall," this wasn't even on the big would-be-

breakthrough album—which was led by the entirely fulfilling "Waters Part"—yet it shows a stunning facility for defining its own little arena to put over unlikely feelings. Better yet, it defines an arena for putting the familiar, typically misused box of eighties sonic tools to actually tasteful use. There are big drums, synths, gated reverb, even our lucky DX7 bell sound—but then there's that ethereal little high pick-hammered-string hook and enough of an ear to pull it all together into coherence. I hesitate to pretend I can even understand all the words, let alone interpret them, but if indeed the chorus is "Rise of moonstruck eyes and grey scales/Take sides before square light rules and seeing fails," I hear a prophetic call to take precautions against going along with almost irresistible social forces.

"The Beautiful Ones" Prince

Here is where Prince earns his purple robes. The giant hit album and movie obviously have their moments, and it can't be overstated what a refreshingly bold, weird sound it all had. Some moments sound like it could be the Residents. "When Doves Cry" has no bass. "The Beautiful Ones," besides featuring the album's all-out vocal tour de force at its end, contains Prince's best melody writing, which is saying something. Todd Rundgren took Philadelphia soul a step further, and Prince in turn takes that a step further into the cosmos of languid sevenths and delirious tritones hanging in the thrall of a maiden on a bike.

"The Boys of Summer" Don Henley

Someone told me Pete Buck turned down a chance to work on this, but then was kicking himself after it turned out so well. That may be entirely false in the details, but it contains one truth: Don Henley, despite his talent, has done what it takes to earn himself the reputation of someone top talents could reasonably feel embarrassed to work with; yet, he can apparently reel it in when he feels like it. There's enough bad eighties stuff on this (crummy synth, Knopflerisms, girl-shot video imagery), but Henley somehow evokes a heart true to the woman connected to the first impression when for all around him it's simply the end of the sporting season.

"Answering Machine" The Replacements

To some extent, I'm ironically rewarding *Let It Be* (still a hilarious title) for being such a successful ensemble album, but "Answering Machine" is almost entirely Paul Westerberg singing to just an electric guitar track. It's probably their best articulation of the cry from the soul of the awkward that became their theme. The lyric hook is almost trite—*almost,* yet in fact all the better for being simple and obvious: how do you say I miss you to an answering machine? (Varying to "How do you say it's okay," and so forth.) That guitar is no mindless accompaniment, it's a harmonic-ripping combination of picking and variously muted strumming with a shower of ninths when it feels bored. And the "if you need help" sample at the end simply could not be more perfectly inflected.

1985

"Everybody Wants to Rule the World" Tears for Fears
1985—it was all over. As drum machines and DX7s blared, crooning emoters with mullets and rolled-up suit jacket sleeves paraded victoriously past countless sorry little rock combos at palpable risk of obsolescence. If you find that much cultural upheaval invigorating, there's a lot to like about "Everybody Wants to Rule the World"—principally, the Olympian dream reality occupied by the chorus melody. It has a way with creating chordal moods extremely economically: there are typically only a couple of notes going at any one time, played on personality-free synthesizers, yet they conjure a solid feeling of idea sharing, despite the fact that I haven't the slightest clue what the lyrics are about. Take "I can't stand this indecision/Married with a lack of vision." If it were "I can't stand this decisiveness/Married with a lack of vision," I could get a fools-rush-in message. As it is, it's sort of: "Fools fear to tread where angels also fear to tread."

"Taste the Floor" The Jesus and Mary Chain
There are some songs that didn't quite make all the sense they were ever going to make until the movie *Tarnation.* I'm not even talking just about songs in the movie—it defined an uncommonly clear and novel aesthetic, and some songs, like "Taste the Floor," are just born to be *Tarnation* songs: mostly introverted, outsider art, with weird production like the tremendous amount of distortion and reverb in the mix here. The J & M Chain were notorious for coming to town, playing for twenty minutes, then leaving. I call that good timing; you don't need 90 minutes of this to learn the lesson. I like the way that just when you think there can't be more treble fuzz in the world, that root-canal solo guitar comes in.

"Each and Every Lonely Heart" The Three O'Clock
I wrote one song on this album, so I should really disqualify myself for overfamiliarity, but let this testify that I considered them one of the lingering flames of hope in the eighties.

"Nemesis" Shriekback
The warbling soprano backing vocals cement the *Rocky Horror* impression made by this memorable piece of goth-disco. The singer sounds a little like Riffraff, only with the comedy replaced by deadpan in-character philosophizing about a fiendish sounding cult of Nietzschean amorality. Nineteen eighty-five was probably the first year there started being no dancing of any kind in rock night clubs, and you would feel creepy dancing to this.

"Paint Work" The Fall

"L.A." and an added single "Cruiser's Creek" are the go-to tracks, but I prefer the devil-may-care sonics of "Paint Work." The Fall create decent music, over which Mark E. Smith sings, or, as often, rants and rambles like a subway drunk on the way home from crashing an ex-girlfriend's party. If you listen closely, there's a somewhat touching thread of biz reflection as he "recommence[s] [his] diary": "Sometimes they say, Mark, you're messing up the paint work."

"Walk It Down" Talking Heads
The very catchy West African–sounding chorus requires that you sit through the verse, whose cookie-cutter '80s funk typifies the later Talking Heads who would never drift far from the primarily one-chord, slice-of-life success of "Once in a Lifetime." But I always enjoy listening to it.

"Anything, Anything (I'll Give You)" Dramarama
John Easdale's frenetic shaggy-dog-story–style rocker is as sturdy as eighties radio
fixtures come. "I'll give you anything you want—hundred dollar bills" is still a strangely indelible line.

"Driver 8" R.E.M.
Stipe was getting more literary and relaxed. The perfect poetic tone of *Murmur* had to have been something of a happy accident (e.g., the idiosyncratic sex and pronunciation of Laocoon), but on this minor-tinged country folk, details like "The power lines have floaters so the airplanes won't get snagged" are obviously conscious in their control of detail.

"White City Fighting" Pete Townshend
This shimmering guitar waterfall was co-created with David Gilmour, whose abilities really go quite a bit beyond what can be inferred just from listening to the post-Waters Floyd albums. Pete loves to apply fairly delicate music to the subject of violence, making an impression that is an odd combination of condemnation and fascination. Good to hear producer Chris Thomas hanging in there with yet a different kind of good sounding record—delicate, but not that gutted eighties sound.

"Things Don't Change" Zeitgeist
They—including singers John Croslin and Kim Longacre—were later the Reivers, whom I haven't had occasion to check out—but this is an R.E.M.-junior classic: ringy, open-string guitar, a reflective moment of isolation. The little guitar descent in the middle of "things don't change, they never have" is a great dash of pepper.

"Sun God" Squirrel Bait
Squirrel Bait were widely known for being amazingly sophisticated sounding for a hardcore band of apparently quite young teens. Some

of them went on to form Slint, and guitarist David Grubbs was half of the engagingly peculiar Gastr del Sol. The immense rock of "Sun God" involves screaming something about feeling the sun on his back and maybe something having "a mind to take it away/TAKE IT AWAAAAY." Strangely real. Maybe some of the best-ever music dreamed up entirely by really young people.

"How Soon Is Now?" The Smiths
Good eighties production—I don't say that much. "I am the son and the heir of a shyness that is criminally vulgar" is a long cultural way to have come for a backing track that would still be a good enough home for "Bo Diddley, Bo Diddley had a farm."

"Circle Square" Other Bright Colors
These very nice guys were a Carrboro, North Carolina, band I crossed paths with a couple of times when on the road in the South, and this B-side of their indie single knocked me out. The singer phrases like Stipe, and of course for people resisting big-time production trappings, it was the era for doing that the R.E.M. way, but they had a knack for getting sixties harmonies and social-consciousness narrative right that R.E.M. wouldn't really get right until later.

"Games" Hüsker Dü
If memory serves, this was the first time I was completely sold on a Bob Mould Hüsker Dü song (unless you count "Eight Miles High," which I more or less do). I wasn't as much of a *Zen Arcade* fan as most of my generation.

"Soundtrack" Thin White Rope
I produced an earlier version of this album that I presume the acquiring larger label considered inadequate and had re-recorded, so this is really another overfamiliarity disqualifier. But you get too picky in the mid-eighties and you're down to Madonna songs (see 1986).

"Forever Through the Sun" LMNOP
This was possibly the single best production of the eighties that used stock eighties tools: big snare and keyboard. Even DX7 bell sound! But, man—*fat* mix. It's not just a glacial big snare, it's a throaty fighter-plane roar, and those synths honk and buzz at you with utterly unapologetic midrange. Fast, somewhat complex and harmony-heavy, it's lyrically the kind of absurdist sneer appropriate to the creator of *babysue* comics, with nutso payoff moments like when a "nurse is going crazy/Like nurses always do/Is she healing you?"

"Insect Mother" Robyn Hitchcock and the Egyptians
Fegmania! was a minor letdown after the quality spike of *I Often Dream of Trains*—why are there so many mediocre Robyn Hitchcock cuts when he is clearly so good?—but this one at least is a little miracle.

It's the usual baloney about love being like insect activity, but he leverages harmonies and odd meter in ways that are uncommon for him, and the miracle is how those synths which are apparently unintentionally out of tune come across as a plus.

"Swimming Ground" The Meat Puppets
One of the best sounding records of the decade—achieved by complete *avoidance* of any eighties technique—was *Up on the Sun.* The unsingerly, almost mumbly vocals seem to just add to the visionary trippiness. The secret weapon is the bass playing—that fairly plain guitar hammer-on sounds orchestral given the bass's colorful support.

"On My Own" ***Les Miserables*** **Original Cast Recording**
Frances Ruffelle was one of the least vicious butcherers of this absolutely lovely tune. Every instrumental track on this crass recording does its best to sound synthetic and horrible, yet the whole achieves the effect of having sneaked the emotion across in budget-cutting circumstances—as if to say: we couldn't afford an acoustic guitar, we had to use this cheap ghastly keyboard sample of one. Sure. I'm guessing it will take any serious music listener at least 30 seconds to get over the sound, but from then on, it's a florid but masterful deployment of a show tune that is of unquestionable merit—something long overdue.

"Trail of Tears" Guadalcanal Diary
What 1985 wanted most was opposition, and a full-on, solid gold Western folk ballad was just the ticket. It's not the Native American trail of tears, it's some story of women waiting for returning soldiers. Whatever; what chokes me up is the digital delay on that snare, brilliant in its caveman refusal of fake grandeur. Oh, and Murray Attaway's fantastic vocals should be mentioned. But wow; the digital delay on the snare. That is what love is.

1986

"My Brain Is Hanging Upside Down (Bonzo Goes to Bitburg)" Ramones
To the extent that I can put my finger on what I didn't like about an era whose cultural highlight was *Pee-wee's Playhouse,* part of it was Reaganomics. For those too young to have felt the adrenaline rush of its first discovery, it was pretty much this: there is not really any imperative to help people who need help, because doing so only encourages whatever behavior it is of theirs that is working effectively against prosperity. I think this mindset trickled down as a widening entertainer/audience divide. By 1986, top ten acts, with their sampling technology and million-dollar video choreography, were absolutely not doing something you thought of as something you could do at home—at any rate, nowhere near the way, twenty years earlier, some appreciable percentage of a given record's buyers would also buy a guitar book or sheet music. Bizarrely a Phil Spector production, the deservedly controversial "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg" doesn't attempt an airtight indictment of Reagan for failing to boycott a German graveyard containing some Nazis (conservative Johnny can't have bought in), but it's aces at putting across the honest feeling of being impotently rankled: "Somehow," one could say of so much, "it really bothered me."

"Live to Tell" Madonna
I conceive of Madonna as being as unartistic as any major recording star has been in my adulthood; she may not be in real life. I think of her compositional technique as advanced sciences of pleasing an audience, entirely unconcerned with imparting a worldview—but that's my self-serving mind fighting what I think might be a fair judgment that this is a well above average song and vocal. The lyrical sentiment, on the other hand, seems no better than canned. This is almost provable just by considering the insane degree to which the world cuts Madonna slack in that area—we can actually endure witnessing her perform these lyrics while hanging on a big mirrored crucifix, when imagining the spectacle of virtually any other artist performing worthier righteously indignant lyrics—say, Helen Reddy doing "I Am Woman"—in a similar get-up would be laughable on the face of it.

"Good Guys and Bad Guys" Camper Van Beethoven
Camper Van Beethoven were a little more self-mythologizing about their folkiness than was always 100% healthy—it led to a clash of plainspokenness with arty absurdism that, to the best of my ability to run the numbers, adds up to this philosophy: all you nihilists had better get over your unfounded belief system. Yet, so they probably should; a little accordion and mandolin demonstration that a song is still really just a nice thing to hum along to, with some homespun didacticism about the silliness of calibrating to political and

socioeconomic metrics, was just the tonic for 1986.

"Fear of God" Guadalcanal Diary
Guadalcanal Diary had the voice, the folk sense, and the timing to be a breakthrough band in the way "The One I Love" became a breakthrough song. But they hit this unfortunate Johnny-one-note pattern where the lyrical approach was too often just to put out these mostly Christian non-sequiturs—"our daily bread," "lost in the hands of God," "white clad preacher with a house of gold"—and wait for the meaning-laden clouds to darken the sky. Musically, this one is good enough to have been on the excellent *Walking in the Shadow of the Big Man,* but it's emotionally draining for me to recommend a song that I'd forgive any listener for taking as a faux crisis of belief; I would have needed a good deal more lyrical hand-holding to get the reality of it.

"Bizarre Love Triangle" New Order
We're getting closer to the range of songs where the first words out of my mouth aren't apology, but we're not quite there yet. For a good thirty seconds, this is as bad as bad eighties recordings get, with the bonehead synth and fake everything, and the lyrics keep up. "The wisdom of a fool won't set you free": one thought it would, but now one's eyes are opened? But when it all gets going, and the terrific Peter Hook's bass has had a chance to cast a spell, it makes sense, and it *is* a fine melody—although with more getting down on knees and praying that sounds suspiciously like unreligious people trumping up emotional intensity with something they don't think is real.

"Columbus" The Church
Here is the inflection point, where I don't quite have more complaints than praise. The Church's eighties sound holds up comparatively well in retrospect because they didn't overdo. They correctly identify that piano/guitar riff, or whatever it is, as what the song is about; they don't pump the sound up to compete with power ballads. Honestly, I don't get "Oh Columbus, I never should have let you go," but if the lyrics are only a few literate-sounding notes of disappointment assembled unreflectively, that works adequately for that gauzy Church emotion—passions vaguely hinted at or dimly remembered.

"Oh L'Amour" Erasure
I remastered this and got it to sound a lot better. My iTunes copy was painfully high-endy and gutless, but beefed up with standard home skills it dusts New Order; here are disco synths generally cooperating, at least up until that nasty fake sax blasts in. The delicate croon is just right for the content: simple, but, as they say, clean lines.

"Ngicabange Ngaqeda (I Have Made Up My Mind)" Mahlathini & The Makgona Tsohle Band
I was working at Marin's "City Hall" record distributor, a one-stop for

most widely distributed independent labels, when *The Indestructible Beat of Soweto* came out on Shanachie Records—a label that to my knowledge had handled only Irish folk-based music like the Chieftains, yet suddenly branched out to South and West African material. It's an amazingly catchy song, with incredibly tight instrumental performances, a stunning female lead vocal, and an otherworldly, foghorn-like male lead vocal that to my ears has something of an exotic novelty appeal, but may be a standard technique for all I know. I should credit Robert Christgau's rave review of this with focusing more of my attention on it.

"Over There" The Connells
Pretty in much the same way "Oh L'Amour" is pretty, but in American idiom, "Over There" has a piccolo trumpet line that goes some ways toward equaling the majesty of "Baker Street"'s sax line. Add to that the breathy but resonant vocals, and a respectable set of lyrics that I take to be a conflicted criticism of militarism in general, and we're now definitely getting somewhere.

"I Hope You're Happy Now" Elvis Costello and the Attractions
Tris McCall is so wrong about this album being better than *This Year's Model,* but it was sure a bright spot in 1986, and there was even the very 1978 move of the second Costello album, the not-quite-as-good *King of America.* "I Hope You're Happy Now" is the song that scores the highest on the *This Year's Model* scale; there's a real rock groove and some chordal longing in quieter moments like "I never loved you anyhow." "You make him sound like frozen food/His love will last forever" doesn't quite add up as a punch line, but works with the gestalt created by the song and the great Attractions.

"Behind the Wall of Sleep" The Smithereens
Pat DiNizio's big vocals handle this outstanding sixties-style F-G-Am pattern torch anthem perfectly. Inspired personages to evoke the era: Jeanie Shrimpton (she had hair like), Bill Wyman (she stood like). Those recent releases doing early Beatles B-sides and all of *Tommy* are wicked cool.

"Four Letters" Volcano Suns
This one might get the prize for sounding the most nineties; it's Peter Prescott, drummer from Mission of Burma, with a borderline emotionally unhinged slab of thick, sludgy rock worthy of any 1988–1992 Sub Pop release.

"True Soldier of Love" Christmas
Christmas straddled the line between brilliant and ungainly. They were never consistent; it was always the case that their good points were so good they outweighed confusing approaches to parody and surrealism. "True Soldier of Love" shows off Michael Cudahy and Liz Cox's outstanding, mostly unison singing, as well as their ability to go

out on lyrical and melodic limbs, yet make it back alive. Several borderline nonsense verses ("We went down to the riverside and looked at fish/Thinking fish thoughts") then ramp up with the comparatively straightforward "Take this nail and then use it to hang my heart upon your wall… And when company calls, you can tell them all about a girl who fell for you," and into a grand climax repeating "you" over new chords. The sudden emotional immediacy is an effective device, and it's interesting that you suddenly remember that Liz is the real protagonist and Michael is the backing vocalist.

"Visa Cards and Antique Mirrors" The Windbreakers
The inspired, grungy, mid-rangy production here has the same mojo as LMNOP's
amazing "Forever Through the Sun" single: buzzy, sustained lead guitar to horrify eighties ears—and DX7 bell sound as a peace offering. The jangly eccentricity of Bobby Sutliff was always a bit of a strange match for Tim Lee's high-energy indie garage rock, but it could all sometimes really hit with fascinatingly explosive musicality, like on this Bobby number.

"Earn Enough for Us" XTC
XTC were notoriously furious with Todd Rundgren's excellent production. I've never known the details, and always been curious. I mean, the mind reels at the potential for bad ideas Todd could be capable of embracing unreservedly, but this doesn't sound like any of those. Let's see—there's no hideous but oddly cool graphic-EQ snare sound, no soul numbers, nothing obviously done on a laptop; could there have been motorcycles and lace sleeves involved? While I like this song's charming and catchy take on wedded bliss in hard economic times, I don't share the general enthusiasm for, say, the hit "Dear God" (nothing against the sentiment, which happens to be lame, but the tune just doesn't do it for me); I'd rather send newcomers to the masterful *Drums and Wires, English Settlement,* or *Oranges and Lemons* as whole albums.

"In Little Ways" Let's Active
Robert Plant was a big fan of Mitch's material around this time, and this tune makes it easy to hear why: Mitch was getting the range and depth of Led Zeppelin right when surface imitators were making the big, dumb noise that was Zeppelin's reputation among critics who approached them shallowly. The lyrics work Easter's theme of dire emotional "ups and downs" with perceptiveness and heroic optimism: "I will not let it go in little ways" is a great line. This atypical piano number has a fantastic instrumental hook and is probably Let's Active's overall best song, on the trailing end of their popular heyday.

"Blue Sky Day" Died Pretty
Ron Peno's over-the-top rock vocals put an oddly indelible stamp on what is otherwise a somewhat rustic, early Rod Stewart sound with organ, mandolin, violin I think I recall. I feel like I love the words,

even though I have an extremely hard time deciphering them—is this perhaps the effect of a thick Australian accent? My best shot at the chorus is, "I will give to you some air, I will leave/A message timeless and some spare time to breathe"; at any rate, it gets a strong feeling of wistful regret across to me, and the real point is a mind-boggling yelp on "well, I…" of the second chorus.

"Fall on Me" R.E.M.

It was very difficult—for anyone—to make progress beyond *Murmur;* I would have bet against it at any given point. *Reckoning:* good one, but sort of the one done while touring all the time that had a less fully incubated mental picture; *Fables of the Reconstruction:* the not-as-good, holding-pattern one with some intriguing but dubious experiments; *Lifes Rich Pageant:* a return to form in a small-audience way, with one secret weapon: "Fall on Me." This was the group's best conventional melody, and brought a real intelligence in the form of their patented "non-linear" lyrics to the art of the breakthrough hit: "Buy the sky and sell the sky…And tell the sky, don't fall on me" works a gorgeous passing minor chord or two into the chorus build-up; "Feathers hit the ground before the weight can leave the air" has the heft of eternal paradox to it.

"I Know It's Over" The Smiths

Morrissey is a better-trained singer now—still not Stipe's equal from the baseline, but with a chance to win with the right serve and volley game, which is what happens on *The Queen Is Dead.* R.E.M. are simply not yet capable of this much emotional directness, much of which is not even that good on *The Queen Is Dead,* really, but when it is good it's astounding. The whole passage with the imaginary rejection commentary is masterful: "If you're so very funny/entertaining/good-looking, then why are you on your own tonight?" The brilliance is in how painfully it is dragged out. "I know, because tonight is just like any other night/That's why you're on your own tonight." To know not to economize there is canny. You don't expect a moral crescendo from Morrissey, but he delivers one of history's best: "It's so easy to laugh, it's so easy to hate/It takes strength to be gentle and kind." To have so lucid an articulation of a loving heart to draw upon any time of any day, when a simple song lyric comes up in one's mind, is an incredible gift.

1987

"No New Tale to Tell" Love and Rockets
I received a couple more year-of-release corrections, bringing "Mandinka" and "Dream World" from 1988 to here; I was kind of thinking of '87 as not quite the heart of darkness of the eighties, which would be '85 and '86, but bad enough. The number of acts I was actually rah-rah rooting for and excited about was near an all-time low. But now with the dream team in place, it's kind of a good collection, and I enjoy listening to each of these songs. "Going against nature is part of nature, too" is a cute line, and as stomp-clap anthems go, I'll take this over "We Will Rock You" and "I Love Rock and Roll."

"Cotton Crown" Sonic Youth
Listening to Sonic Youth in general isn't the surest bet to lift my mood, but they unquestionably have their moments; there's a warmth and loviness to this one, as well as the fetching almost-off-key category of indie appeal that SY do as well as anyone. You can almost imagine Sonny and Cher doing this one, maybe lying semi-conscious on either side of a room at the Chelsea.

"Devil's Radio" George Harrison
I had "Where the Streets Have No Name" here, but I was forced to reckon with the fact that I always fast-forwarded past it on the CD I was reviewing. But this one is la-la-la-la-love. The freak hit *Cloud Nine* was a crazy revelation of George's ability to do big hooks, and "oh yeah, oh yeah, gos-sip, gos-sip" is one tasty gospel-derived nugget. George can put the preacher in gospel in a way that limits his peers to more of a surface emulation.

"Touch of Grey" The Grateful Dead
Interesting that the Dead, a little like George, had the ability—that they didn't whip out but a time or two a decade—to be as catchy as anyone. "Sorry that you feel that way/Every silver lining's got a touch of grey" is a believably conveyed sentiment to defuse contentiousness, which is probably an underappreciated skill honed in Dead culture, what with having to work out economies in miniature for vending, etc., at the scale of their live shows.

"Ambitious" Wire
Wire seem like people who would have had no trouble adjusting to the ice cold production timbres of 1987, and in fact the first-round comeback album *The Ideal Copy* comes close to giving the sensation that Wire invented all of this. Close. They ditched some of the melodic chops that set *154* apart. "Ambitious," eighties embodiment that it is, has an appeal unrelated to past Wire or to other artists; "When it's cold I feel cold/When it's hot I feel ambitious" is a hilarious refrain,

perfectly delivered in one of Colin Newman's most theatrical voices, with touches of Ferry, Waters, and even David Thomas.

"Just Like Heaven" The Cure
For simply running down a major scale, this is one sturdy and universal hook. The Cure are one of the most extreme cases of me never being very close to wanting to own the album, but I've absolutely got to hand it to them for being able to write something memorable. I guess they're one of the first adolescent bands that cleanly missed my adolescence.

"Mandinka" Sinéad O'Connor
Love those great head-voice hoots—but fight the real enemy: drum machine!

"Cara Lee" Chris Stamey
I hate the production; it sounds like he decided to try to make it into a Peter Gabriel record late in the game. I'd heard the song live, and it's a killer. Still a great cut. More tragic was the case of the once staggeringly beautiful "Time and All She Brings to Mind," which ended up sounding like "Born in the U.S.A."

"Sweet Child o' Mine" Guns 'N' Roses
Everybody's favorite guitar warm-up pattern turned megahit is just fine in my book. The lyrics are even decent. Starting to cry if he stares at her face too long is emotionally accessible; so is hating to ever see an ounce of pain in her eyes. "She's got a smile that it seems to me/ Reminds me of childhood memories" has a probably unintentionally weird appeal. Just how remote a similarity to something is *seeming* to *remind* someone of a *memory* of it? I'd say there's a very real chance she bears no mental connection whatsoever to his childhood, wouldn't you?

"Waiting for No One" Carnival Season
The singer of Carnival Season gave me a copy of this album when I was out on tour—one of literally hundreds of such demos or indie releases I've received from artists with whom I've shared a fleeting social context in which the material is enjoyable, and that's all I ordinarily expect. This one just keeps impressing more and more as time goes on. Produced with punch and farsightedness by Tommy Keene (Guns 'N' Roses sound anemic by comparison), this frenetic, loopy, hypermelodic rocker comes closer to being a 1987 cut able to pass as, oh, a 2005 Panic at the Disco recording than is generally conceivable.

"Fireplace" R.E.M.
There was no better news in the eighties than the huge success of the supremely worthy R.E.M., but their breakthrough hits, "It's the End of

the World as We Know It" and "The One I Love," were musically unremarkable. Not "Fireplace" (or, for that matter, most of the rest of the *Document* album); it's inventive, sophisticated, and great sounding. There are only a few lyric lines in the song, but isolating "Hang up the chairs to better sweep" as a signifier for new beginnings, exaggerated to a crescendo of throwing the room's furnishings into the fireplace, is exhilarating and just a little disturbing. Besides a typically outstanding Stipe vocal, the highlight is Steve Berlin's fabulous school-of-Coltrane sax work.

"The Cross" Prince and the Revolution
A vague Eastern inflection on the guitar and in the structural lyric details temper what is otherwise a straight Christian sermon—a very effective one. The key verse, following one about a starving mother, is: "We all have our problems/Some big, some are small/Soon all of our problems/Will be taken by the Cross." One's own death and the threat of others' death are foregrounded, with the clear directive, "Don't die without knowing the Cross." That much blunt solemnity is admirable and audacious by itself, but putting across the idea that striving for an empathetic mind is both a duty and a favor to one's own spiritual being in an intelligible and engaging way is no small achievement.

"Alex Chilton" The Replacements
I insist on the original vinyl for this one; the CD mastering I heard sounds like someone lost the thread of a grand compression plan. It's easy to imagine the Jim Dickinson production leaving a fair amount of madness to be dealt with in the stereo master. Who would think to write a song about Alex Chilton? Brilliant. Musically, it's a still pretty but more bracing variant on "I Will Dare," and lyrically, it follows the "Candle in the Wind"/"Vincent" rule: a song about a celebrity has to contain some complaint about the masses' wrongheadedness in death. Here, "If he died in Memphis, wouldn't that be cool?" And a decent job of that it was, actually.

"Levitate Me" Pixies
Fort Apache certainly turned out its fair share of great results, with Gary Smith's—bracketed by this and *Submarine Bells*—impressing mightily. "Levitate Me" is the Pixies very nearly as fully realized as they ever would be ("Come on, pilgrim, you know he loves you"), as was the art direction match made in heaven that was Vaughan Oliver's hair and picture frame graphics.

"Moonhead" Thin White Rope
Guy Kyser's spooky account of what I would guess is a mentally ill protagonist deciding to kill himself because he's at risk of killing his girlfriend is the apex of Thin White Rope's murder ballad, spaghetti Western, Ridgecrest CA via Davis CA rock. The intricately interlaced guitar theme here is stealthily introduced and becomes a powerful climax, and Kyser's voice is iconic: kind of, Johnny Cash after he'd

wandered insane in the desert for a year.

"Palindrome" The Ophelias
This recording stands out amid those of the era—it sounds absolutely like a million bucks. I think Tom Mallon may be responsible for the sound, but at any rate, this is pre–David Immergluck, and thus figures to be largely the Leslie Medford show. The 6/8 time, the harmonica, the faux-anachronistic drama of the vocals ("History is written in the buff/But by the time you read it, it's all window dressing stuff"): all rippingly good.

"Not My Slave" Oingo Boingo
Danny Elfman has had a wild career; from the social-conservative jump, jive and ska of Oingo Boingo to what must be one of the most lucrative film scoring careers in Hollywood (the *Simpsons'* theme and the *Edward Scissorhands* score being among the most memorable), he's a vastly talented guy who can be musically annoying in the extreme. I don't have a rational explanation for why the ignored single "Not My Slave" rubs me so much the right way, but I'd venture to characterize it as some supernatural conjunction of Steve Nieve and the Smoking Popes. Certainly the Farfisa and verse vocal hooks ("With everyone around telling us what to do") are very strong.

"Stop Me If You Think You've Heard This One Before" The Smiths
I'd call this the highest musical altitude to which the Smiths soared. It's a very good lyric set; not their very best, but containing at least one top-drawer zinger. The verse uses the same chords and is closely related to the chorus, building to the payoff of "Nothing's changed, I still love you/Only slightly, only slightly less than I used to." There's a rich density of chord changes, sounds, and ideas that works well against the backdrop of the normally more discursive, duotone presentation of Morrissey and Marr.

"Dream World" Midnight Oil
Here's another case of eighties elements brought out of their initial charter and reassembled to serve the good. *Diesel and Dust* was a fine whole album, and a big step forward for Midnight Oil (I thought "Power and the Passion" was just irritating). The guitar arpeggios and portamentos are just right. Something about the way Peter Garrett says, "Your dream world is just about to end" makes me think my dream world is just about to end. I guess this is an environmentalist take on undesirable land development but the emotion translates to any case of taking a wonderful situation for granted.

1988

"Bone Machine" Pixies
Nineteen eighty-eight felt like the year of the first successful efforts to pull the eighties out of the toilet. Joe Becker introduced me to the Pixies (am I actually supposed to say "to Pixies"?); the most important thing the Pixies did was to oppose the eighties' tyrannical moratorium on frequent or challenging chord changes. The big eighties iceberg that had formed in 1987 was *The Joshua Tree,* and the feature of U2 that stood out to me was staying obstinately on one chord or boring pattern for as long as possible. Almost all of creation went along with this direction, but the Pixies were having none of that: in the likes of "Levitate Me" or "Bone Machine," the more audacious and frequent the chord changes, the better. If anyone wonders what Kurt Cobain meant about being primarily influenced by the Pixies, look first to the openness to bold chord changes. But that was just the beginning of the Pixies' charms. They were born entertainers: not to suggest there's anything funny about so on and so forth, but the part with "He bought me a soda, he bought me a soda, then he tried to molest me in the parking lot, YEP! YEP! YEP!" has some sort of crazed cinematic genius to it. And in the whole artwork theme, Lynch-like tableaux of detritus marshaled into a credible challenge to all that was Madonna.

"Party for Your Right to Fight" Public Enemy
This is probably the best, hardest-sounding sample-based hip-hop groove I've heard. I think there's a very short delay on some of the tracks that when misused is at risk of making a mix sound swimmy, but here works as chiaroscuro for the performance tracks. D and Flav sound fantastic together, reading the riot act in lock step. It seems almost unsporting to admit the words sound suspiciously like conspiracy theorist nonsense to me, grafted devil that I may be accounted as being; yet a lot of these facts could be wrong and still point effectively to the undeniable truth of the global historical oppression of black people.

"Kidney Bingos" Wire
Their prettiest melody still has me asking: are kidney bingos some sort of lottery for getting an organ transplant or something? I liked *A Bell Is a Cup Until It Is Struck* quite a bit; *The Ideal Copy* seemed too much like a deliberately updated sound, where updating anything from 1979 to 1987 should be carefully avoided. But *A Bell Is a Cup* felt more personalized. Statue of a horse head. File cabinet. That's my Wire.

"Cult of Personality" Living Colour
Let's not forget heavy metal as another sad fact of eighties life. But there were bright spots: the production here is bad, and I find Vernon Reid's soloing somewhat horrendous, but the rest of the music is

pretty much one great passage after another—no less so the math-rocky indulgences. The equation of bad guys and good guys under the cult of personality is a somewhat bitter lyrical pill. I think I like it. I want to deduce a challenge to acceptance of the verdict of the crowd; the crowd will choose Gandhi or it will choose Mussolini according to its varying needs.

"Suckling the Mender" Cocteau Twins

"Union of love/Union of perfect love/She ain't sent here for him": as Elvis once said, lady, I don't know what the hell you're talking about. But the paced addition of the modifier and the slang feel like they tell their own little story to me: keep the way clear for the ethereal in the presence of disillusionment. The Cocteaus' finely crafted fairyland sonics are certainly their own story, too.

"Life Is Grand" Camper Van Beethoven

This is one dynamite-sounding recording—I believe Dennis Herring's first big production. It manages one of the fattest, most direct sounds of the generally anemic era, perfectly setting off David Lowery's uncomplicated refusal to be not cheerful in the expected alternative rock fashion. The guitar riff that starts off with the moving harmony and resolves on the single notes is a terrific little line.

"Fast Car" Tracy Chapman

Tracy's delicately understated vocal and her outstanding gift for social realism made this a favorite of many, even the ordinarily tin-eared Grammy Awards. The song begins inauspiciously, with "nothing to prove" and "nothing to lose" sentiments even suggesting hack work. Then she brings out, "He says his body's too old for working/I say his body's too young to look like his"; woah—definitely a keen eye, and, one infers, a lacerating wit being kept under control. Later, "See more of your friends than you do of your kids" projects a detailed picture and makes a powerful point with very few words.

"Nancy Experiences the Pulse" Jonathan Segel

With his Magnetic Records, Jonathan Segel, the violin player from Camper Van Beethoven, has had a fascinating and Promethean little cottage industry going, producing many bedroom folk, rock, progressive, and generally boundary-pushing releases. A familiar of Fred Frith and Eugene Chadbourne, Jonathan first stepped out with the panoramic *Storytelling* double album. A typically casual yet precise folk/progressive hybrid verse anticipates Gastr del Sol of ten years later, then the chorus delivers a monumental hook on the unlikely refrain, "How it seems to really happen/Numbers match on the warp and woof."

"Freight Train" Sister Double Happiness

Falling somewhere between hardcore and B.B. King–style blues, this cut from their SST debut is interestingly chilling. I assume "I got the

plague of the century" refers to AIDS; it's presented in an unexpectedly stylized, almost rockin'-pneumonia manner, with enough details to stay alarming: "I woke up in the middle of the night/My skin's like a block of ice." Despite—or maybe with help from—the dark subject matter, this succeeds as an uncommonly driving rocker; Lynn Perko's drumming is especially momentous.

"Charlotte Anne" Julian Cope

This is still definitely the pre–*Peggy Suicide* Julian Cope. It sounds like eighties club music, albeit with a non-textbook military march inflection; it doesn't have the spark of druid madness that would fire the early nineties. But it's still very good as its own thing; the "Charlotte Anne/I do understand" followed by the little synth flute tag is a fairly timeless pop hook with a twist that worked for the times, and still does today.

"Bad Machinery" Let's Active

Mitch Easter and I worked together for many, many hours; almost everything I know about record production I learned from observing him while making my band's records. The Let's Active releases felt like unusual outbursts from sides of him I wasn't used to; it's not much of a secret that he's a crack guitar player, but there's that, and another aspect peculiar to the albums was a flair for what I'd call prophetic weight. His recurring theme was people—in love relationships especially—realizing they'd wandered into a world of undreamt-of emotional turmoil, and how that alone makes the human horizon look dark. On the larger-implication end of that is "Bad Machinery," a blazing, almost Bad Company–like meditation on the urge to personal advantage gone global. I love the line, "You've got no rendezvous with no destiny."

"Teen Age Riot" Sonic Youth

Until this year, I had the vague impression not many people besides myself were fans of this song. I didn't realize what a big critical deal *Daydream Nation* is now considered—they and my band were both on Enigma at the time, and you get a skewed impression from the inside. Although if Gerhard Richter does your cover and I don't realize you are the man, I am just not thinking. As established classics go, "Teen Age Riot" does not have that much *there* there. The lyrics don't really zing me. The tune skirts being plodding, but by a strange gravity reels you in over time. The hooks are really in the rhythm guitar—that in itself is a rarity: just the little lilting notes here and there. And before long, you start hearing that even more meandering intro, and Kim going "spirit desire," and just go: yeah!

"Waiting Room" Fugazi

There is a winning tension between precision and chaos in this field holler–style post-punk anthem. Did I just say "post-punk anthem"? Wow, becoming a bad rock critic just happens to you and you don't even notice. I'd call attention to this as a precursor to "Cannonball" by

the Breeders.

"I Don't Want to Fall in Love" Sam Phillips
I remember thinking *The Indescribable Wow* was a rapturous return to effective melody writing after a long drought. I think I sort of started actually believing my melodic aesthetic had become a thing of the past and I just had to move on. Well, I sort of never completely stopped actually believing that, but that record made me feel a lot better for a while. Ms. Phillips seems like a formidable, reticent soul, who comes up dependably with art and human observation: "Sentimental circumstance disguised as fate with wild romance/Fools me into thinking you're the water for my thirst." One *could* suspect an as-bad sentimentality about "fate," but the skill of getting that thought to even fit the scansion has my hat off.

"Summertime Rolls" Jane's Addiction
Railing against boring chord changes aside, Jane's Addiction could conjure more musical value out of two-chord songs than any other group I can think of; "Jane Says" is also two chords, and it feels like more. Perry Farrell's instincts with blue notes are the key. I thought *Nothing's Shocking* was the best record of the year, and from my perspective, I'd credit it with pioneering an appreciable chunk of the grunge aesthetic: un-modern hard rock with a dash of irony, shuffle beat, soft-loud things happening here and there. "Summertime Rolls" has a get-loud moment I love—right after, "I mean it's serious/As serious can be."

"I Believe in You" Talk Talk
Spirit of Eden represented arguably the most important album story and the most laudable artistic stance of the last 25 years. It's particularly interesting that Mark Hollis didn't break from the hit sound in too obvious a way; it's as if the sound elements were simply freed, and allowed their natural drift heavenward. The album is mostly long pieces, but "I Believe in You" is compact enough a featherbed of luxuriant organ to function on a no-lulls sampler like mine. I don't mean to go too far in praising "serious" music over music that makes an honest commercial living, but this song is truly a transcendent evocation of spirit, and I mean there's a part where he's singing "spirit, spirit" over and over.

"Ana Ng" They Might Be Giants
What a song. The first album made a splash, but it didn't bespeak the level of quality of songs like "Ana Ng" or "They'll Need a Crane" on the second record *(Lincoln)*. As a systematic rejection of eighties values, this is relatively thorough. No big drums. Humor. Accordion. In many ways it sounds nineties. Chord changes—all over the map. The chords and quarter note emphasis on "Exit wound in a foreign nation" exemplify the adeptness of the composition. Now they're making a presumably comfortable living as part of Playhouse Disney. *They Might Be Giants/Here Come the ABCs* is great!

1989

"I Want to Be Adored" The Stone Roses
I couldn't not include a Stone Roses song in 1989, just because English people love them so much. Between you and me, I don't quite, totally, 100%, get it; but, you know, I love the English. I think musically we somehow owe them one. This is very decent ("She Bangs the Drums" is also very decent). "I don't need to sell my soul/He's already in me" is most of the way to being a very clever line. Did I really carry out due diligence to see if there was another more deserving song for this slot? I don't believe I recall.

"Good Thing" Fine Young Cannibals
In a way, this is the perfection of what Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" was trying for. It's a more right-on Motown pastiche, and just a tighter, higher-energy dance groove all around. The clean guitar in verse two is playing some truly crazy, unwise stuff; I like it.

"Pastoral" The Jesus Lizard
The lyrics are mumbly, but I once formed the impression this is an ode to a dead animal in a field; if so, with the harmonically sophisticated arpeggios here, it's, uh, up there with the best of those ever. One of the more disturbing phenomena in rock journalism is the way the Jesus Lizard are recommended in terms of some act of theatrical violence or needling offense carried out by David Yow. I can believe from some pieces—like this—that they were exceptionally good, and maybe that, combined with a repeatable stage behavior story, added up to magic, but maybe insiders should be informed that to as much of an outsider as myself it usually comes off sounding a little cold-blooded. As for David Yow the person, I have it first-hand that he's actually a very sweet guy.

"Disappointed" (edit) Public Image Ltd.
I'm positive that in 1977 I'd have bet that in twelve years' time it would be Peter Gabriel sounding punk and not Lydon sounding like "Solsbury Hill"—and for a couple of years I would have looked savvy—but look how wrong I was. Yet, the more-eighties-than-the-eighties world beat disco that is late P.I.L. is also what I'd rather listen to. Lydon is like Dylan in that he projects unmusical priorities, yet he has undeniably compelling musical instincts and skills. Consider the fancy run at "Disappointed a few people," resolving in the simple, emphatic "Well, isn't that what friends are for?"

"Wicked Game" Chris Isaak
He got songs in both David Lynch and Stanley Kubrick movies, so I feel far too much jealousy toward him to expend effort here formulating nice things to say.

"Waiting for Mary" Pere Ubu
After projects like *New Picnic Time* and *The Art of Walking*—which I also liked—it was an ear-opening and welcome surprise to hear Pere Ubu return to pop styles hinted at in "Thirty Seconds over Tokyo" or "Street Waves." Only David Thomas can do the Goofy voice on the chorus or the arty yelping in the bridge and pull it together with the "What are we doing here?" hook as a coherent commercial venture: I hope *Cloudland* actually sold some; it surely deserved to.

"Knock Me Down" Red Hot Chili Peppers
My band got a little indie-music award in 1984 (at an event held at Studio 54!), and the presenters were the Peppers, who did their famous thing of walking out naked except for redeployed socks. I tell the story every couple of years, and each time it's a little more prestigious to have been thus honored in full dress uniform. This is my favorite Peppers cut, nailing 1974 funk with a little hint of Steely Dan thrown in.

"The Devil's Coachman" Robyn Hitchcock and the Egyptians
If you want to play a friend some Robyn Hitchcock and you don't want to run interference for content that is too graphically horror-film or too ponderously meditative, you just want to get across what an entertainer he can be, this is the one. "Yesterday I saw the devil in the nude/It was embarrassing"; "I remember everything as if it happened years ago." Andy Metcalfe's fretless bass work is a big part of the show, too.

"This Woman's Work" Kate Bush
My wife Kristine played this for me. Without question it's an intensely emotional piece. I listened to it for some time thinking it was about the death of a husband, remembering a note on James Joyce's *Ulysses* that somehow glossed "woman's work" as dressing a corpse, or vice versa. Then I learned it was for the film *She's Having a Baby,* and there's the line "Now starts the craft of the father," so that seems to settle in favor of new parenthood, right? Then I don't ultimately know what to make of "I know you've got a little life in you yet/I know you've got a lot of strength left" and "All the things we should have done that we never did." It doesn't really diminish the sheer grand-piano-in-a-spotlight power this song wields, though.

"Last of the Famous International Playboys" Morrissey
The song itself is fantastic enough to shine through any performance shortcomings, which here are legion: the tempo seems to drag, the synthesizers doing the gliding octaves are artless, and there are some not quite ignorable tuning problems, just to get started. I wouldn't have paid attention to it at all if it weren't for the blazing cover of it I saw John Easdale play live. This is in fact one of those few songs—and two of them came out in 1989—where if you cover it live, everyone in

the room will love it, whether they've heard it or not. In the lyric, an apprentice killer seems to be attempting a postal rapport with an incarcerated serial killer, as if they shared a sense of accomplishment and carefree attitude fading in these times. "I am not naturally evil/ These things I do/Just to make myself more attractive to you/Have I failed?": to be that good as both social criticism and character development is unimaginable at my level of craft.

"Veronica" Elvis Costello

The results of the Costello/McCartney collaboration were pretty eagerly anticipated, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, they included this excellent song that was also a hit. It's sing-songy and story-telly, and has a little "Penny Lane" trumpet part—honorary Beatlehood. At the end of the eighties, record producers didn't want big snare and lots of reverb anymore, but in a sense everyone was left wondering what to do with their hands; T Bone Burnett comes up with a too cracky snare drum sound that in hindsight is amusing, although I remastered a little to take the edge off.

"Twenty-Five Forty-One" Grant Hart

Besides "Playboys," the other 1989 song you can play for any room full of people and they'll love it is Grant Hart's "Twenty-Five Forty-One." Marshall Crenshaw did a bold and successful cover that actually changed the chorus melody and chord feel to something different but equally satisfying. The song really captures that feeling of getting your own place, recalled from the later perspective of giving it up due to some social rupture among the cohabitants. "2541/Big windows to let in the sun" is a great chorus. *Intolerance,* at least for the first five songs or so, is a remarkable and somewhat underappreciated record.

"Rockin' in the Free World" Neil Young

This is well-known enough that I don't feel the need to go into detail. The part about the abandoned kid who will "Never get to fall in love/ Never get to be cool" slays me every time. It's funny, though; I listen to the political commentary here and do a double-take kind of like: "uh, we had problems in 1989?"

"Roam" The B-52's

Unarguably pretty, "Roam" seems to also have some indefinable weight of feeling beneath the surface. I want to imagine it's infused with perspective brought about by the death of Ricky Wilson, but I have nothing rational to base that on; there's just some extra edge of emotion and longing in the vocals and in the way the harmonies soar and reach.

"The Mayor of Simpleton" XTC

"Dear God" was a cute song, but in a world where that becomes a fairly huge hit and "The Mayor of Simpleton" does nothing, I just shouldn't be talking to people with any air of authority about musical

value. The way "I may be the mayor" moves to "of simple-ton," modulating the last note in the pattern up, then going to "but I know one" with the glorious high suspended 4th on "one" is what music is all about.

"Leah Hirsig" The Ophelias

Top-secret market research indicates that among material with whom this project brings first-time infatuation, the Ophelias will be putting up big numbers. Front person Leslie Medford was a multi-instrumentalist eccentric who had a wild singing style; Michael Quercio and I idolized him. An indie band on Rough Trade, the Ophs had as much pro impact as any band in late-eighties SF, and their recordings have the most modern punch of any I can think of in retrospect. One secret weapon was David Immergluck, a true ace guitarist who eventually wound up in the Counting Crows—the wrong place to figure out how great he is. This is the right place; the solo here is just on the verge of being wanky, but reins it in to the realm of charged-up personal expression. The lyrics channel the occultist moonings of Aleister Crowley for a muse of his, events I know about only because of the song. "Night after night/Sweet mother of the living light" is a devastating payoff chorus, and the verses showcase Leslie at his off-the-leash best.

"Debaser" Pixies

The Pixies caught fire the hottest with the Gil Norton–produced *Doolittle*. My nineties band was in a pattern of doing one cover per tour of some song that was not quite old enough to have revered classic status, and this was the one we did on the 1996 tour (it's on our only live CD); thanks, Mr. Francis and company, for helping us strike audience-rapport gold with that decision. There's something pretty insightful about the mania of a would-be artist screaming "I am oon chien andalusia"—mangling details of the phrase perfectly—and wanting to grow up to be a debaser. The past century's artists know nothing so surely as that they want to break rules, and strip polite society of its fragile gentility. They want to grow up to be debasers. Ho ho ho ho.

"Free World" Kirsty MacColl

Listening to Live 105 in SF in 1989, the earth quaking and the Berlin Wall coming down, this song stood out like a Rembrandt among velvet matador paintings. The cascading images and pronouncements are a beautiful kiss-off to unredeemable social irresponsibility—"And I will see you baby when the clans rise again, women and men united in a struggle"—catching a glimpse of how one day this all *will* break down (and we're now seeing worse symptoms)—"It's cold, and it's going to get colder.… Going down with a pocket full of plastic." Johnny Marr dips into U2's Edge's style just a bit for a chiming, screaming, percussive rhythm/lead, and Steve Lillywhite's production funnels often static eighties elements into the very essence of momentum. One of the hundred best songs of the rock era.

1990

"Theme from *Twin Peaks*" [edited to TV playing time] Angelo Badalamenti
Postmodernism sprang up in pop culture in 1990 in a fairly noticeable way, led in the public eye if not by Jacques Derrida then by David Lynch's riveting *Twin Peaks* TV drama. Lynch's love for the peculiar *logos* of screen reality translates as a continual awareness of what technique does to quaint details, like rural office workers appreciating their morning coffee and doughnuts; to some extent, Lynch paved the way for the ironic distance of grunge from hard rock, or *Eightball* comics from Marvel Comics. Angelo Badalamenti's theme sculpts using the raw material of memories of soap opera themes and doo-wop slow dances; it is perhaps the first piece of music that creates the mood of creating moods.

"Birdhouse in Your Soul" They Might Be Giants
This isn't so much TMBG's forte as TMBG's *moment,* but one of the late rock era's golden memories is the disorienting spectacle of Doc Severinsen putting his all into a *Tonight Show* rendition of this little song about a night light's confession that it doesn't really provide any security.

"Cathy's New Clown" John Wesley Harding
I'm close to complaining that nothing quite achieves escape velocity here, but this modest heaping-onto of "Cathy's Clown" keeps making small, correct musical decisions until evidence has mounted that Wes is really an unusually good singer. He's mostly doing Costello, and doing him well: "Watch out, there's a body talking body talk/A big mouth just gets in the way" is crack-a-smile E.C., but somehow is also the moment that puts the feel of an unquestionable winner across.

"Work" John Cale & Lou Reed
Songs for Drella was a real bright spot in Velvets-related history. "Trouble with Classicists" by Cale and this by Reed are my favorite cuts—entertaining, musical, focused less on edifice planning than sound, creativity, and, yes, work. The piano and heavily distorted guitar create an ear-pleasing chug, while Lou does sung, occasionally-structured verse about Mr. Warhol's work fetish—ostensibly critically, but in a way that allows us to appreciate that Warhol was anything but a dilettante attracted to mass media as a way of cutting corners.

"Don't Ask Me" Public Image Ltd.
Wearing a big good-guy white hat as an environmentalist and further confusing the paradigm with a like-proper-professionals-of-three-years-ago sample drum and synth sound, Lydon continues to get things done impressively in ways that don't initially seem right for

who he is. Good for him: "What's it all about/They scream and then they shout" is possibly his beefiest hook ever, and all of the politics make perfect sense to me.

"Americana" Thin White Rope
Another reckoning parable from Thin White Rope uses variations on a hypnotic guitar figure to teach that "You get what you expected from your eighteen-dollar home/The worth of having cheated and the rage of being alone." Extra points for the fact that the chorus wanders far afield of the verse key, and they don't lift a *finger* to mitigate the weird interval back.

"The Man I Used to Be" Jellyfish
Per their version of postmodernism, Jellyfish telegraphed a compelling appreciation of production values ripe for revisiting, from their H.R. Pufnstuf wardrobe to their bright selection of *Saturday Night Fever* producer Albhy Galuten for their debut album. Especially with Jason Falkner in the lineup, they were the right people to produce a quality result, too; my band rehearsed across the hallway from them for a long time, and you could hear them literally practicing the same three-second vocal cluster for an hour.

"King Strut" Peter Blegvad
His idiosyncratic, sometimes terrific seventies band Slapp Happy moved in prominent European art band circles with Chris Cutler, Fred Frith, and (of course) Dagmar Krause; this song is high-polish, Dylanesque raconteuring about rags to too many riches, over a winner of a Richard Thompson–like guitar riff.

"The Only One I Know" The Charlatans
The shuffle beat, sixties organ, and chomping phase shifter guitar were to my knowledge the pioneering instance of a very influential style manifested in, say, U2's "Mysterious Ways" and "Right Here Right Now" by Jesus Jones.

"Everyone Moves Away" The Posies
Dear 23 was the impassioned, youth-coming-of-age era of the Posies. While the lyrics aren't nonstop brilliance, they tend to have a way with a turn of phrase when it counts, sometimes in passing ("and the family kept its end"), sometimes at focal points ("inside the big, nameless house from which everyone moves away"). Besides the clearly fetching vocal harmonizing, there's Jon Auer's guitar work, which was and is on track to take a place among the best.

"911 Is a Joke" Public Enemy
I remember thinking that on *Fear of a Black Planet,* Public Enemy knew they were making serious art music now, so we're down to a more discreet level of put your hands in the air. "911 Is a Joke" is a

great lyrical idea—as serious art goes, a big success in terms of choosing just the right signifier of the breakdown of reasonable U.S. living conditions outside of a certain socioeconomic boundary line. That said, I have a feeling that I won't really have lived until I hear the George Michael version of this.

"Dig for Fire" Pixies
The irony-ready Pixies use an uncharacteristically big '80s beat to spin an initially condescending-sounding yarn about chatting up dotty old wandering eccentrics about what they're scrounging for ("the motherlode?"). The disconcerting answer is, "No, my child, this is not my desire/I'm digging for fire."

"Tunic (Song for Karen)" Sonic Youth
Kim Gordon's performance of this is amazing; in a mostly spoken dramatization, she speaks imagined thoughts Karen Carpenter would have in the afterlife, indicating that given less pressure and more freedom she would have enjoyed a lower-key garage band scenario where she focuses on drums—in her new situation, practicing with "Jimi," "Janis," etc. Interesting. I'd be awfully self-conscious trying to pull something like that off knowing Karen's family is probably paying attention, but there does seem to come across a true and strong wish for the universe to somehow provide solace to a troubled soul.

"Bouncy Bouncy" The Billy Nayer Show
Veering close to absurdist performance art, Cory McAbee's "Billy Nayer Show" was the most dependably hilarious and outrageous San Francisco band night out for years. This debut indie release captures the crazed, nonsensical glory of which the music was capable, as well as inaugurating a series of first-rate paintings (for example, do a web search on "The Villain That Love Built") and curious film projects.

"Debris Slide" Pavement
Pavement were probably *the* postmodern band, what with the recommissioned E&J brandy Matador album art and the equally inspired reference to Sony's "perfect sound forever" CD slogan on this Drag City landmark. I'm delighted to admit I kind of got punked by them around this time (man, me and Billy Corgan)—I had a band called Game Theory, and around 2000 we were hearing confusing reports that we had a "reunion show" publicized somewhere; we eventually traced it to a years-old parody of a future rock festival poster done by Malkmus, including "Game Theory—two original members!" The mighty "Debris Slide" beats even Billy Nayer for sheer what-the-hellness; the combination of the young guys and the awfully colorful-sounding Gary Young was golden in those days.

"Home" Iggy Pop
Wow, do I adore this song. It's in a way borderline unimaginative three-chord rock, but it just keeps sounding better and righter and

more powerful to me. I remastered it to give it a little more punch and less fizz. “Home, boy/Home, boy/Everybody needs a home” is an almost shockingly unlikely chorus. It’s the perfect street-level prayer of gratitude for not being quite homeless—not an easy emotional pitch to pull off, but this is *really* rocking, and infectious, and believable. “You better love it,” indeed.

“Voice in My Head” The Sneetches
That chorus—“Another day, another wrong, another right,” etc., is one of the catchiest of the era, or of the catchiest of eras—it could have gone toe-to-toe with “Got to Get You into My Life.” Mike Levy is the auteur, and bassist Alec Palao is a pop connoisseur who, for instance, wrote the liner notes of the Zombies CD box. The organic crunch of the guitar, the tight horns, not too much treble on the drums, a dead cool variation fade-out: all show an instinct for doing 1966 right that would make the Explorers Club jealous.

“Heavenly Pop Hit” The Chills
Submarine Bells is a dynamite whole album, the international star and culmination of New Zealand’s Flying Nun Records scene and “the Dunedin sound.” The Chills’ 1987 *Brave Words* and 1992 *Soft Bomb* were also very decent, but *Submarine Bells* sparkles all over (the ending tracks “Effloresce and Deliquesce” through “Submarine Bells” are an uncommonly lovely parting), and “Heavenly Pop Hit” is simply magical in its freshness and luminosity. “I stand and the sound goes straight through my body/I’m so bloated up happy, I could throw things around me” is so peculiar a choice of words it can only be the truth.

“Almighty” Christmas
Christmas were one of the great marginalized acts. The *Vortex* album material actually went unreleased until 1993 when Matador put it out, and meanwhile Michael Cudahy and Liz Cox had assumed the identities of “The Millionaire” and “Miss Lily Banquette” in their new “cocktail nation” alternate universe project, Combustible Edison. So for the sake of authenticity of artistic progression, I’m situating this plain old pop music masterpiece in the pre-enlightenment era. The key tracks (“Superheroes” is almost as outstanding) have a strange prophetic weight, grappling surrealistically but only slightly ironically with ultimate concerns of human nature. “A reputation travels time/A man can grow into a monster or a hero” is typical of lines that seem like they’re broaching Joycean or Girardian areas. Finally, though, it’s the music—those three sections of different, accelerating tempo, all gorgeous—that mustn’t be missed.

“There She Goes” The La’s
Almost every living soul likes this song upon hearing it once; that is a staggering achievement, requiring a number of key people to have done everything right. There’s no good way to quantify or reckon with the aspect that is perfection of crystalline instrumental composition,

so I won't hurt myself trying too hard. I can't offer a clear precedent—it's better than "Ticket to Ride," for instance. It's an excellent whole album, too, the better for not playing by the rules of the times in any discernible way. *And* they were very good live (I had the good fortune to see the La's on this tour), especially—surprisingly—the drummer. The singer is apparently the prickly sort; you can't trust rumor, of course, so all I'll say is that if there's any chance it's true that some band member or other happened to have, oh, disowned the album because the producer couldn't produce the right 1965 snare drum sound, I'd like to recommend that this entirely hypothetical band member in question ring Mr. Lillywhite and blurt out, for example, something about the job he did being in retrospect rather incredibly good.

1991

"International Bright Young Thing" Jesus Jones
Before Nirvana hit, the sound of the nineties had a strange false start as a not unworthy British phenomenon—an era of amped-up shuffle-beat dance club tracks (the movie *24 Hour Party People* captures this to some extent, though the Happy Mondays were never a focus band for me). In 1991, I had a London record biz acquaintance named Stuart Batsford, and he made me one of the most memorable and vista-expanding mix tapes I've had, containing mostly new British sounds, including my first exposure to Teenage Fanclub and My Bloody Valentine. In the mists of memory I've forgotten whether Jesus Jones were actually on there, but they illustrate the most public aspects of that era of Brit sound—they were staples of DJ clubs I'd find myself in at the time, like SF's DNA Lounge. Remember "club reel" projection graphics, with the cutting between op art and '50s educational films?

"Someone to Love" Roger McGuinn
The *Back from Rio* album was a discovery I made thanks to my wife's mother Trudi's remarkable record collection (same for Roy Harper). It's as good as any Byrds record, and also contains "You Bowed Down," one of the originals of the Costello collaborations that ended up on *All This Useless Beauty*.

"Jungle Fever" Stevie Wonder
This theme song from the Spike Lee movie was even better on the screen; on the home stereo, the whole bass register comes off too unison. Still, Little Stevie Wonder the 41-year-old genius sounds as great as ever, it's a top-quality singalong, and there are enough nice touches to keep the ears awake.

"Alec Eiffel" Pixies
As with "Debaser," "Alec Eiffel" is a somewhat dramatized free-form American mental riffing on some point of continental culture, where by "riffing," I pretty much mean going nuts. The singer persona focuses on "Little Eiffel" as a hero of putting inspiration across despite public displeasure, echoing the Pixies' continuing unwillingness to water down their melodic complexity, rawness, and, I guess the right word is: silliness. Inspired.

"Colour Me" The Blue Aeroplanes
The beautiful folk guitar here is the main selling point, but Gerard Langley holds interest with an almost-spoken-verse contemplation of the fate of artistic lost souls of Dylan Thomas stripe. Illustration of their having "made a mess of their lives": "They could be played by Tom Waits." A nice little real-life conversation touch. Thanks to Mark Staples for alerting me to this.

“Oh No, Won’t Do” Cud
From the Batsford tape. Sung from the point of view of a presumably allegorical agent of global malevolence (“folks ’round here call me private enterprise”), this is one of the more peculiarly British varieties of tight, propulsive grooves à la mode. A hard, hot guitar-riff-based mix—and what has to be a keen wit that I don’t get 100% of the time, but enough. The logo has udder teats under the “u.” Best-of album title: *Rich and Strange* (from “The Tempest,” I presume).

“For Love” Lush
Also from the Batsford tape. This is much more ethereal than the others, reflecting a touch of Cocteau Twins, but also some shoegazer overlap with other one-word acts like Ride and Blur. The lyrics give the initial impression of being throwaway rhymes about “lies” and “tries,” but they’re actually very decent: “Doesn’t recognize the lies pouring from her lips … This is so real/It’s what I feel/I look in your eyes and lose myself.”

“I Feel So Good” Richard Thompson
Here’s one of my favorite Thompson cuts. A very nice little Irish musical theme is the soundtrack for a guy getting out of jail and ready to live high at the expense of anyone who gets close enough: “I feel so good I’m going to break somebody’s heart tonight.” “Now I’ve got a suitcase full of fifty-pound notes/And a half-naked woman…” (no spoilers!).

“Breadcrumb Trail” Slint
Slint’s *Spiderland* was one of the many benchmark releases on the innovative and putatively artist-friendly Touch and Go Records. It embodied some of the buzzwords like “post-rock”—shared with the Drag City contingent—in a particularly entertaining incarnation. The popular favorite from the album is the intense, higher-profile “Good Morning, Captain,” but I gravitate to the jauntier “Breadcrumb Trail” with its ten-dollar time signatures and the coolest fuzz feedback sound ever on the chorus guitar lead.

“Blind Willie McTell” Bob Dylan
This was apparently left off *Infidels* to the consternation of some. I’m just grateful we got it. I’m always conflicted about whether to place delayed releases at the time of creation or release, but for this year-CD project I usually settle on release time, and this case is an easy choice because Dylan seems to have intended the delay. It’s one of his prettier tunes—and he’s good at pretty tunes—with one of his most serious lyrical observations: that the judgment for slavery still hangs over the new world. I love the incredible succinctness of “I traveled through East Texas where many martyrs fell.”

“Evangeline” Matthew Sweet
American artists like Matthew Sweet didn’t have quite the impact on me of the likes of My Bloody Valentine, but they did one amazing thing: started delivering mixes as razor-sharp as anything out of 1966 EMI. In the end, I have to account holding the same note on the bass through the verses as a tactical error, but of a piece with a boldness that elevates the album as a whole.

“There’s No Other Way” Blur
This was the most perfect of those British dance-club–targeted tracks. Big, updated funk drums and bass led by a great rhythm guitar riff, and the hookiest chorus around.

“Oh Catherine” Pere Ubu
I recall someone in Pere Ubu saying at the time that they didn’t ordinarily produce melodic pop because “nobody ever asked us.” They were good at it! I liked the sort-of-comeback *Tenement Year* okay, *Cloudland* even better, and at least the song “Oh Catherine” a whole lot. There was another good one called “I Hear They Smoke the Barbecue” (you can’t lose with the line “I hear they love old Yogi Bear”).

“The Freed Pig” Sebadoh
This most forward-looking of early nineties songs is so effortlessly right it took people a while to know what to think about it. You started to hear Lou Barlow’s name connected with “low-fi” by 1994, which isn’t quite it; this is an uncommonly crisp and hot recording, à la the new American ’90s mixes, with a guitar riff as high-class as they come. It’s a hilariously ironic lyric—someone admitting that a standard litany of kneejerk lovers’ (bandmates’?) quarrel accusations are true: “Right, I was obsessed to bring you down…Playing a little-boy game,” and my favorite, “Tapping till I drive you insane.”

“Glorious Delusion” Chris Stamey
Marching as always to his own drummer, this piece of meticulous craftsmanship from the *Fireworks* collaboration with Pete Buck, Anton Fier, Mitch Easter, and others inhabits the posh realm of Peter Gabriel or maybe even Moody Blues sonics more than those of anyone you’d expect to be playing Maxwell’s. The cathedral-size production delivers surprising intimacy: “Now I’m a party to your glorious delusion.”

“When You Sleep” My Bloody Valentine
One of two jewels in the crown of the Batsford tape was My Bloody Valentine. *Loveless* wasn’t out at the time; what he included was “Honey Power” off the *Tremolo* e.p. “Come in Alone” is probably the flagship for the sound of *Loveless,* but “When You Sleep” is classically tuneful as well. But what a sound. MBV probably take the all-time prize for making you go, *“How* are they doing that?” It’s loud—live, apparently *very* loud—rock, but with a strange, aquatic drift to it, that

Kevin Shields explains in rather inauspicious terms like interplay between similarly tuned guitar strings, but stories I've heard about the sessions indicate a lot of magic went on that occurred too late at night, over too long a period, and, er, et cetera, for anyone to have kept scrupulous mental track of. For what seemed like a label-killing train wreck of a project at the time of release, this really *does* sound like the third of a million bucks it apparently cost, and has grown uninterruptedly in critical reputation ever since.

"Tongue Long" Metal Flake Mother
This blazing fireball of lyrical incomprehensibility is the sort of confusing but full-tilt rock one could apparently expect from Jim Mathus before fronting the Squirrel Nut Zippers. My favorite Lou Giordano production (or tied with Christmas's *In Excelsior Dayglo)* is just too wild and untamed to try to describe further (actually, here's one fine line: "oh, to be nailed to the wall that you built"), but obviously, placed as it is between My Bloody Valentine and Nirvana, I'm dead serious about its quality.

"In Bloom" Nirvana
The rise of Nirvana was a once-per-generation crowd phenomenon as unsettling to Kurt Cobain as it was thrilling to participants. Joe Becker had one of those music biz jobs where he heard all releases, and he had it playing in his car. "Polly" was the first thing I heard; that's a tough first impression. The singer persona is committing some species of alarming abuse, and I wonder if it's possible to object that the tone of disapproval is under quota. Certainly the media and fan frenzy didn't have much to do with "here's a band that's really sensitive to abuse," it was "these guys aren't *faux* lowlifes, they're the real thing!" Or at its least unflattering, the more "intense," the better. I first started hearing "Smells Like Teen Spirit" in dance clubs—not college radio–type channels, which is where I'd heard Sub Pop stuff like the Screaming Trees—the same DJs who played Jesus Jones would play Nine Inch Nails' "Head Like a Hole" (which I didn't like at all) and "Teen Spirit," which I thought was quite good, and the title very funny, but do I dare say there's some slight but noticeable under-musical aspect to that repeated riff? After about a month of gathering buzz I heard "In Bloom," which I thought was spectacular in every way. The drums are amazing; the kick is immense but still punchy and contained as anything, the whole kit has a great, spacious bark to it—but that all hinges on Butch Vig's most special and important miking technique: making sure they're pointing at a guy named Dave Grohl. I don't want to get into comparisons that could be seen as unkind to Nirvana's previous drummers, but I have to say that Grohl's modesty about his effect on Nirvana is not easy to agree with.

"Alcoholiday" Teenage Fanclub
After "In Bloom," it's awfully obvious that "Alcoholiday," um, *doesn't* have Dave Grohl. Or Butch Vig. But it's subtly better. Teenage Fanclub were, with Pavement, probably equally important pioneers of the nineties slacker aesthetic. The 1990 release *A Catholic Education* was

about as sludgy as serious record releases get, and the brilliantly titled and packaged *Bandwagonesque* cleaned things up just enough to let the band's formidable pop capabilities shine without compromising the impression that these are people who don't *always* get out of bed every day. Stuart Batsford put "The Concept" on my tape, and it's good enough, although wearing denim and listening to the Status Quo must have some significance in Britain that bespeaks great cultural ineptitude—or something I'm not getting. Me, I'm fine with denim. "Alcoholiday" is a wonder. It's probably the most beautiful melody of the decade, it's the first instance of it being clear how great a singer Norman Blake really is, and it's not one of *the* best lyric sets, but it's just right, in a Big Star *Third* kind of way: "There are things I want to do/But I don't know if they will be with you." If that doesn't look like much on the printed page (so to speak), try it with Norman's heart-rending high notes on "they will be."

1992

"Contact" [edit] Stereolab
Nineteen ninety-two, the quintessential bad nineties year, was the year music listeners decided once and for all to settle for crap. Surprisingly, that was an improvement in the long run: the eighties, a decade of striving for advancement—video, dance productions, philanthropy—mostly got stupider for the attempt (though I'm all for the philanthropy surviving). Grunge was a lot better than New Romantic, and it was an aesthetic of giving up: you could look slovenly and not have to shoot any higher musically than *Master of Reality*—it was up to your audience to approach you with the right irony or stupidity. But there's an obvious level at which a culture illustratable by Dan Clowes is vastly superior to a culture illustratable by Patrick Nagel. The message of the times is almost a dilettante approximation of humility: you can't have it all, you can't in fact have very much, but you can have something adequate (remember OK Cola?), and you can snicker postmodernly at your past hubris. I was fairly gung-ho about Stereolab, because the appearance of master aestheticians is always exciting, but in their extreme form, they do ask you to give up on anything having to do with development or attention span. "Contact" is an exception: it manages a credible buildup, albeit on a somewhat tectonic scale. I edited some of the repetition.

"Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang" Dr. Dre
Kind of like U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name," this was so much what was going on, so universally approved, that the line is blurred between accepting it as God's will and liking it, which I don't think I quite do. The production is pretty incredible, and the delivery is entertaining, but as a recording artist doing—as professional rock critics like to call it—"braggadocio," all I can say is that my collection of braggadocio art already felt complete going in.

"Lilly" Shiny Wet Parts
This was some people I know—Shelley LaFreniere, Gil Ray, and Robert Toren—doing a little, barely distributed cassette project, but I think they got a phenomenal result. It has something very similar to that *Bee Thousand* sound two years in advance; in other words, working cassette tape saturation to get a big, crunching result. I think it was just drum machine and some kind of modest but inspired guitar —and Shelley's excellent vocals.

"Nearly Lost You" Screaming Trees
My first exposure to grunge was in 1988; the opening bands for Christmas in Berkeley were Mudhoney and Soundgarden. I thought they were okay; Soundgarden finally
won me over by encoring with Cheech and Chong's "Earache My Eye."

The Screaming Trees were the Sub Pop act that was typically recommended to me by insiders. It was some Geffen Records people whom I was first aware of going nuts over Nirvana, not Northwest natives.

"Photograph of Mary" Trey Lorenz
Here's a nice, slick, hooky little cassette single (YEAH) from a guy who was apparently famous mostly for doing backing vocals for Mariah Carey.

"Joking" Indigo Girls
The earnest, truck-stop–ready strumming of the Indigo Girls is at a keen emotional pitch on this retelling of an encounter with someone who apparently turned out not to share the same emotional pitch in retrospect. "I could have been your sister/I would have been your brother/You kissed me like I was a soldier headed for a war…And you were only joking." That's a lot of nuanced impact to absorb if you weren't there, so to speak, but they make you feel it.

"Mary" Tori Amos
There's something naively show-biz about early Tori Amos, kind of the way a high school girl would do Janis Joplin, or Cher: glory is "glow-ray." I find that appealing, in her case; it seems to say that refining signifiers of earnestness is categorically less important than earnestness itself. The subject of the lyrics is wanting to get a girl away from an exploitative situation; there could be a hint of a cry for freedom in the language of the oppressors.

"Perfume-V" Pavement
The broad appeal of Pavement is certainly a nineties thing. Pavement's bag of themes—cover-up, sluttiness, bleeding, erosion, all barely over the edge of intolerability if that—are touched on in the reluctantly tuneful "Perfume-V." In my opinion Pavement eventually got a lot better than *Slanted and Enchanted,* but it's a good sign that a whole lot of people would give a rather Dadaist album a chance.

"Popular Creeps" Chris Mars
The song's so good one can ignore the fact that Chris Mars is one of those music people who really shouldn't write lyrics—although "better leave us loners alone" is almost a good line. But he can really sing, in a sort of Popeye way. And I guess he did the cover art, which is very impressive in an Oingo Boingo album cover sort of way.

"Young Splendor" Pond
Darkly harmonized, with a feel of hollow fourths and fifths, suspended, a little dissonant: grooving; I think they're saying something about gun violence. Against?

“Better Than Nothing” Jennifer Trynin
There’s a pioneering use of midrange grind, achieved here by Leslie speaker I’m going to guess, but something you hear a lot more in slightly altered form 15 years later. This was a stand-out mini hit on KITS-FM.

“Rosemary Girl” Mike Keneally
Possibly Mike Keneally’s poppiest tune, it of course contains some champion guitar work, and also some uncharacteristically straight-ahead, major-chord rock.

“Anne” Flop
Flop will take a verse and just repeat it several times, and that’s the song. Usually works great. Why do I knock myself out with varied second and third verses? It’s a great little melody, and Anne is watering her mother’s dahlias, which rhymes with starting to feel the valium. Done.

“Hoover Dam” Sugar
Here is Bob Mould just getting better and better. Sugar is capable of less idiosyncratic but still serviceable sound compared with that of Hüsker Dü. The vivid image of walking along the edge of the Hoover Dam at the risk of being blown off by the wind is a nice metaphor, but also compelling as-is. The guitar work is very pro, worthy of Hüsker efforts despite the synth indulgence.

“The Statue Got Me High” They Might Be Giants
“The truth is where the sculptor’s chisel chipped away the lie” is just one of many clever, hummable lines from the still-hanging-right-in-there Giants. The bari sax charts and the intricate response vocals are highlights. Oh, and there’s “My coat contains a furnace where there used to be a guy.”

“Hair” P.J. Harvey
I think this is in 5/4—not bad—a swingy, bluesy groove with a slight art rock edge. Credit Steve Albini with a nice big sound, for a mix that gives the impression of being bone dry. Those toms are nice, and good call keeping the overall CD volume off steroids. Ms. Harvey puts just exactly the right amount of soul and histrionics into “Hair” to menace, with the classic Samson and Delilah story as a threat of female usurpation of power.

“S’il Vous Plait” Sneakers
Here I am, at it again with the Chris Stamey. Can I help it? Here’s a track resurrected with Mitch Easter to flesh out a reissue of the 1976 and 1978 Car Records classic e.p.s. Am I crazy to think this is an undeniably superb, taciturn piece of songwriting?

“Try Not to Breathe” R.E.M.
Automatic for the People is one of the most justly celebrated records of the nineties—the surprise second pillar of R.E.M.’s monumental reputation. There’s a great solemnity to it, accounting the weight of death and experiences gone forever in “Man on the Moon,” “Nightswimming,” and the devastating “Try Not to Breathe,” which literally details the reasoning of someone facing death—ostensibly from old age. Stipe really takes control of the best-lyricist position here, just in time to fend off Liz Phair’s flippant 1993 offensive. Almost every line is a gem; “Baby don’t shiver now/Why do you shiver?” is an example of making the conveyance of astonishing depths of humanity look easy.

“Up-wards at 45 Degrees” Julian Cope
You know those swirly digital animation engines driven by music, like Visualizer? Here is the song that is the absolute best fit for those I’ve ever come across. You know a dream of blasting out of regimented, Christian terrestrial life is very near and dear to Julian’s heart, and he is marshaling the “dutiful people” to blast off to the “mothership.” I really don’t know if he means all that at a metaphorical level, or if he’s plotting literal coordinates, but it’s a rush. The way he varies the chords under “upwards at forty-five degrees” makes for a precision-engineered sustained climax.

1993

"Cherub Rock" Smashing Pumpkins
The nineties were better than the eighties, and one key reason was that there was less originality. Originality is unmusical. The urge to do music is an admiring emulation of music one loves; the urge toward originality happens under threat that the music that sounds good to you somehow isn't good enough. In the nineties, bands pretty much all had a single thought: we want to be the next Nirvana. Bands had the least fear in years that following their hearts and doing straight fuzz-guitar pop-rock was somehow old-fashioned. There were a lot of good songs. Life was simple. It's not as obvious listening today why something like "Cherub Rock," which might have been the third best song on a Black Sabbath record in 1971, was particularly exciting music in 1993; it was the impossibility of getting away with it in the decade in the middle that makes it so.

"Jump They Say" David Bowie
The dance club touches sound just a bit rinky-dink, don't they? But the sax is fantastic. At least I think it's a sax, and if so, I think it's Bowie, whose sax I always love. "Sweet Thing/Candidate": Olympian. This is apparently about Bowie's brother who is or was in some sense mentally challenged; I forget the exact story. The "they say…" lines followed by "I'd say he should watch his ass/Don't listen to the crowd" are typical of Bowie's always-astute social commentary.

"Slow Dog" Belly
A tough alt-country rocker, this tells a story I can't quite follow about Maria carrying a rifle and taking care of a dog with see-through skin, spicing things up with just enough off-kilter interval choices and atonal elements.

"Mistress" Red House Painters
The Red House Painters were the San Francisco manifestation of a subculture of soft, ethereal music that thrived amid the generally loud aesthetic of alternative and grunge. The diatribe of the lyric is rather uncategorizable, but pretty engaging; I'll let a few lines speak for themselves: "The attention I need is much more serious/A kind of weight you couldn't lift/Even if your cheap career depended on it/I need someone much more mysterious/To be my miss/To be my mistress."

"Jimmy's Fantasy" Redd Kross
The McDonald brothers were an endless source of entertainment based on various forms of pop culture either parodied or amplified into absurdity (any other Tater Totz fans out there?); "Jimmy's Fantasy" was their best actual song of the ones I've heard.

“Lights Go Down” Madder Rose
The name of the oil paint screams art school just like the album art and the occasional trippy sections and Exploding Plastic Inevitable nervous guitar bursts. They were a standout NYC band of this era, never going too long between really catchy passages (see “Car Song”). Singer Mary Lorson had a winningly offhand delivery that suggested native chops enough to be a big star.

“Cannonball” Breeders
Hard to put one’s finger on what makes this so compelling; certainly the guitar/bass up-and-down groove pattern is a terrific creation. It has dub appeal—lots of holes and mix breakdowns. It’s hardly ever not fun to hear the word “bong.”

“The World Is Turning On” The Pooh Sticks
This was a wildly capable pure pop combo who used to amuse me quite a bit by having every other song title be some apparently untransplantable name of an already prominent song, like “The Wild One, Forever,” or “Sweet Baby James.” I know, “Let It Be,” but it was still a great hack.

“Everybody’s Best Friend” Hazel
Hazel ordinarily did noisy, by-the-numbers alt rock; this minimalist meditation is an out-of-character triumph. While some of this dejection monologue is rather overdone, there’s an undeniably appealing element of truth-telling in what seem like the between-dramatics breather lines: “I am not what is wrong here”; “Somewhere, I forget where/Supposedly I am somebody’s best friend”; “So I wait at home/Gauging the backlash.” And, in context, the kicker: “I want to wake up in my own bed again.”

“I Heard Ramona Sing” Frank Black
The Pixies had less trouble with the eighties than just about anyone, but it’s still great to hear Mr. Black with a big, fat production and all the arrangement textures he’s capable of. Sometimes high-profile, sometimes not, he’s remained a consistently fascinating artist and given us more material than we’ve had time to get through conscientiously.

“Angels in the Trees” Murray Attaway
This is a continuation of Murray Attaway’s stunning work in Guadalcanal Diary, expanded to a complex, piquant, chordally hollow string and vocal arrangement with an off-count feel that is just challenging enough. Lyrically, this might be a boring anti-religious thing; we’ll pretend it’s shatteringly iconoclastic. It’s the committed atheists who just can’t shut up about angels and heaven.

"The Great Valediction" Flop
Rusty Willoughby always seemed like one of the more interesting Seattle guys—besides being a formidable band front-person, he has always had a good sense of visual design integrity. The artwork of the major-label, Martin Rushent–produced *Whenever You're Ready* is an imaginative Warhol-the-illustrator-years pastiche, and the big power pop inside delivers on the promise.

"Metal Mickey" Suede
In 1993, Sue Trowbridge's influence on my tastes was in full swing; thanks to her, I was well informed about developments like this Britpop monster that didn't get much play stateside. Killer verse, killerer chorus, and the secret weapon is the hyper-trebly fuzz guitar that sits out most of the song only to hit a few slashing chords every once in a while.

"Radio" Teenage Fanclub
Thirteen didn't quite fulfill the considerable expectations created by 1991's lordly *Bandwagonesque,* but this Gerard Love uptempo rocker is an extremely worthy high point. "Baby, justify the reason behind your style/Find a craze that fits and stay there for a while," besides being solid-gold catchy, is an arrestingly clear moment of challenge to consensus reality.

"All Apologies" Nirvana
From the reproductive medical imagery to the closing death-mantra of "All in all is all we are," Kurt went out more real, vulnerable, and terrifying than ever. This is a fantastic production; I want to credit remixer Scott Litt with little touches like throwing the reverb just on certain words—if only because I don't think Steve Albini abides responsibility for that kind of flourish. Kurt didn't usually strive for much beyond good, honest self-pity in his lyrics, but on this one he started flirting with genius. To me, artistic genius has to do with the tendency to gravitate toward important issues, not the ability to come down on the right side of them. See Nietzsche. Kurt seems to home in on the failing of the sacraments ("married, buried…all in all is all we are"), the remaining all-burdened sacrament being marriage. His own marriage and fatherhood haven't relieved his own turmoil, and he somehow knows this is connected to blame: "Everything is my fault/ I'll take all the blame/Aqua seafoam shame." Is that the cliché of seafoam being a tacky color worn by bridesmaids? I think he's saying: I'll admit it—I'm the outsider, the tacky bridesmaid, the gay person, that we all are. So destroy me. But our blame-relieving efforts really only backfire ("choking on the ashes of her enemy").

"Sanity in the Asylum" Matt Keating
This little firecracker was on my '90s label, Alias, or I might have missed it. Punchy is an understatement; there's a relentless wordplay onslaught in the manner of Elvis Costello, guided by a keen octave

guitar countermelody and an alert, ear-catching arrangement from start to finish. And talk about hot mastering—you blow Nirvana and Urge Overkill out of the grooves and one has to salute.

"Sister Havana" Urge Overkill

The last four are from albums I refer to as the Big Four from 1993, all albums that came almost from out of nowhere and ended up being pillars of my conceptualization of the '90s. *Saturation* is one of the best turn-it-up hard rock records ever: top-flight singing, unusually strong composition through the whole CD. "Sister Havana" best matches the whole feel of the design look, which is outstanding—a sort of *Charlie's Angels* chic that it struck me was much imitated later, never as well.

"Definite Door" The Posies

I wasn't familiar with *Dear 23* when it came out, and when I first heard *Frosting on the Beater,* it sounded murky to me; it took me a while to mentally disentangle the tonal cluster the Ps sometimes traffic in. The mildly psych hard riff rock of "Definite Door" is Jon Auer's Posies high point. This is what '90s rock did best: it's what you think you want from Deep Purple, only this is better.

"I Should've Known" Aimee Mann

About the time this came out, I got a call at work from Aimee (she apparently knew someone with my number and just wanted to say she liked a record of mine); I didn't know who she was, but we established that I recalled enough about 'Til Tuesday to place the face. We ended the call agreeing she was going to send me this, her first solo album. I sort of expected to like but not love it; it positively floored me. I'm very tempted to put the sublime "Fourth of July" here, but it somehow seems more honest to include the one that first assured me she was a force, and I'd just had incredible luck and honor to have received that contact.

"Stratford-on-Guy" Liz Phair

Exile in Guyville was certainly the album of the decade. The first moment of thrill is when "And all the bridges blown away keep floating up" just as the vocals and the band go up—yeah!—and no song is any kind of letdown—until maybe, truth be told, the very last one. Liz's gift for believable invective is astonishing, and though there are some scattershot attempts, enough wit hits its mark to keep one thinking this is a person one would really like to get to shoot the breeze with. "Stratford-on-Guy"—I guess I take the title to be an amusing parallel between Shakespeare's home Stratford-upon-Avon lying outside London and the vistas flying into Chicago, containing an area she nicknames "Guyville." The wordsmithing is as sharp here as anywhere ("The earth looked like it was lit from within/Like a poorly assembled electrical ball"), and the chord sequence walks right on the brink of disaster at all times making its way to the payoff "It took an hour/Maybe a day/But once I really listened, the noise just went away." It is only too bad that Liz's lyrical prudishness has kept her

from reaching a hipper audience. Maybe one day she will just loosen up.

1994

"My Blank Pages" Velvet Crush
By 1993, a lot of bands had figured out that it was okay to be a guitar band again, and in 1994, some were deciding it was okay to be a *heavy* guitar band again. You still couldn't be outright hair metal, no doubt to much secret chagrin, but ironic postmodern nostalgia made for a leash long enough to sneak in some Hendrix, as with Soundgarden or Lenny Kravitz. This, when you did the math, was another way of stating the curious fact that new bands could *only* be alternative bands; there was no longer any such thing as being whatever this was the alternative *to.* Classic rock radio was of course really big, and non-ironic, but whereas in 1984, the average teenage loud guitar band was actually prepared for Foreigner covers to figure into their early career path, ten years later anything like that was gone from the world. Situated on the album *Teenage Symphonies to God,* "My Blank Pages" reminds us there was a hard guitar rock strain that cared about the Byrds and Brian Wilson (famous "symphonies" quote), and not much about grunge.

"Number One Blind" Veruca Salt
The giant hit "Seether"—a fine song—doesn't quite showcase the specialness of the talents of Nina Gordon and Jim Shapiro as I've had the good fortune to get to know them. The chordal lyings-in-wait of this interestingly post-Pixies ode to shade make the case I have in mind.

"Run-Around" Blues Traveler
The Beatles brought to rock and roll—from classical and Broadway—the idea that you had to write your own chord progressions. Before the Beatles, if it wasn't a I-IV-V or doo-wop progression, it was pretty adventurous. Dylan is the major artist who didn't always buy in; even at its most Daliesque, *Blonde on Blonde* is pretty close to simple folk blues, chordwise. The Dylan of today is way over writing an original chord sequence. Sometimes I sit myself down and wonder what's with my fetishizing of original progressions. What is my problem with "Margaritaville"? There is no problem, I tell myself. Today's beneficiary of that perspective is John Popper's ragingly adept, enthusiastic harmonica playing and vocal stylings on "Run-Around." He is just *so* happy with a line like "Hollywood's calling for the movie rights/Saying baby let's keep in touch" that I'm happy, too.

"Loser" Beck
Tom Rothrock's breakthrough project, this slurred rap over a drum loop helped translate the "slacker" principle of the Richard Linklater film to pop music. The apparent point of the casual sixties references —the sitar and *Blonde on Blonde*sque nonsense lyrics—was their achievement with a conspicuously tiny fraction of the effort expended

by George Harrison or Bob Dylan. To me the value of the slacker principle is related to that painting principle where all other things being equal, a few confident brushstrokes look better than a lot of fussed-over ones. Not that all other things are equal in the case of this versus Harrison or Dylan.

"Live Forever" Oasis
I was excited about Oasis's second album *(What's the Story) Morning Glory,* but not yet really that excited about this, the 1994 debut *Definitely Maybe.* Yet, excited the world was. Liam Gallagher is unquestionably in the top tier of rock singers. They're in the Stone Roses category: English groups doing music that's a bit more Jagger/Richards than, oh, Depeche Mode or Run D.M.C., but familiar enough "modern rock" territory—yet a lot of English people heard these groups, and life had new meaning. So I feel underqualified to include a song like this for just being professional radio fare with modest historical resonance.

"Corpus Christi Carol" Jeff Buckley
I've just discovered Elvis Costello's 500 Albums You Need in time to pinch exactly one selection: this wonder from the intense flame that was Jeff Buckley. He glorifies this 16th-century composition, in which pagan and Christian visions of renewal converge mysteriously, with a falsetto so ethereal as to telegraph the kind of grail obsession T.S. Eliot treated in *The Waste Land* directly to the heart.

"Headache" Frank Black
Frank Black continues to apply hyperrealistic focus to odd little details of human experience, like the beauty pageant parody of success on the cover, or being so down before meeting "you" that he had him a headache: "My heart was crammed in my cranium/And it still knew how to pound."

"X-Ray Man" Liz Phair
After *Exile in Guyville,* plausibly the best debut album in pop music history, Liz gets bonus points for coming out with the follow-up the very next year—three years seems about normal in the post-Floyd era. The tunes and the rhetoric are still mostly there; you have to love "cheap unpleasant desires."

"Puppet" Lisa Germano
I've only heard the 4AD *Inconsiderate Bitch* (great title) version of this song, which I guess was also on an earlier Capitol album I haven't heard. I focus a lot on the sonics, which I find to be a particularly effective use of mid-frequency violin drone, accompanied by some Indian instrumentation that might go well enough with tambura. Strong melodically, the lyrics are a little whiny: wow, minor social accommodation—that must have been rough.

“Give Her a Gun” Echobelly
Sonya Madan’s amazing vibrato and revolutionary spirit make a remarkable first impression. I mean, she wants to shoot people.

“Ask Me No Questions” Kindred Spirit
Bangle Debbie Peterson’s incredible prowess with heavenly pop harmonies has never left us, you just need to know where to look, and fortunately my friend Dan Vallor does. But for Susanna Hoffs glancing fetchingly to the side in “Walk Like an Egyptian” in the think-visual eighties, music this good, seemingly ripe for wider public consumption, might have been steered toward it. You never know.

“Connection” Elastica
I hope they worked out the plagiarism suit with Wire; Wire are such a great band, but it saddens me that they actually felt they had a claim on the quality of this recording, which earns a place in the large audience booty-shaking realm Wire should know not to hurt themselves trying to broach.

“Cornflake Girl” Tori Amos
This is one of the more talked-about lyric sets; confining my reaction to what seems verifiably contained in the song, it’s certainly a penetrating exploration of unendurable psychological stress, but I wonder if I’m picking up a little anthropological strain in its positioning of “raisin girls” (the multiculturalists) against “cornflake girls” (parochials? monotheists?). Drifting toward post-song rhetoric a bit, intolerance is bad, but there’s something wrong with Western intellectuals deciding they, not their monotheistic forebears, invented tolerance, and their contribution will now be to factor in the values of other cultures they privately regard as too primitive to have invented tolerance on their own. Anyway, I think there’s an admirable defense of victims here, and I’m essentially here for the piano riff.

“Creation” The Creation
Not many people remember the Creation, and of those, only a handful realize they released a reunion CD. Damn! This fuzzed-out slab of head banging is extremely catchy, and sounds a lot more like AC/DC than the Who-nuanced mid-sixties material. A very fun find.

“What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?” R.E.M.
Another lyrical rabbit-hole, there’s that Dan Rather assault incident reference, and some further connections to Donald Barthelme and Kierkegaard I’ll have to get back to you on. Happily, it’s once again mostly the memorable riffs and vocal hooks that brought us here. The little six-note guitar figure is a marvel.

“Kinder Murder” Elvis Costello
E.C. seems never to have lost his ability to produce a fine standard

riff-based rock song with a theme about how a young lady threw the whole game by lusting after a lout. Give him that equivalent of baling wire and chewing gum, and he will build a working shortwave radio every time. Some fraction of the strung-together figures of speech I used to understand are, over time, getting replaced by subculture-specific details I don't: here, details having to do with, uh, some sort of unsavory armed services hook-up? There's a bit about "one false eyelash" in a disheveled purse that I want to hear as an echo of *A Clockwork Orange.* Hey, I know what knickers are!

"My Name Is Jonas" Weezer

Statistically speaking, almost no one identified the first Weezer record as any sort of classic at the time, and too many of those who did were mostly fans of the not particularly worthy "Undone (The Sweater Song)." "My Name Is Jonas" shows their strengths off: musicality everywhere, theatrical dynamics, little golden lyric details where the subplot reveals the whole mood. That would be where the letter contains "words of deep concern from my little brother," where the "little brother" is part of or possibly in charge of a major-sounding construction project interrupted by injury, leading to a heroic chorus of, "The workers are going home." The ambiguity of whether the interruption is a bad setback or a good holiday clarifies the bittersweet cusp of adulthood, and the incongruity of "toys," "plans," and a "little" brother. Even more significantly, did freaking Ric Ocasek positively nail this production or what?

"Buzzards and Dreadful Crows" Guided By Voices

Bee Thousand did what no other record release had ever been able to do: put a home recording across as a major industry event. Delivered to the label Matador on Realistic cassette tape according to legend, *Bee Thousand* made the philosophical case concealed within a grunge aesthetic befogged in layers of irony: that pop rock music hadn't become a matter of resources and capitalization at an unalterable level. The medium doesn't obscure the fact that this is one of the decade's best vocal performances.

"Last Poems" Cardinal

That late afternoon shot of Richard Davies and Eric Matthews strolling by the junipers is somehow perfect. An obscure release at the time, it's an oddly isolated pool of still water; the two carry out their baroque duties with an interesting admixture of anachronistic proficiencies and adolescent gangliness. "Last Poems" is the understated highlight; any moment with Matthews at the mic is a richly textured revelation, but this somber tonal haiku of vaguely institutional regret contains a lifetime's worth of strange resonance.

"Cut Your Hair" Pavement

The slacker principle achieves its truly perfect embodiment here. The performances are no more polished than they need to be (consider the one-take sound of the ooh-oohs), but every brushstroke is purposeful.

“Loser’s” lyrics are pretty close to just plain nonsense, whereas “Cut Your Hair” is both winningly playful, e.g., with the dramatic voice of “I’m just a boy with a new hair cut” popping in to set up “And that’s a pretty nice hair cut,” and incisive in its deconstruction of music biz careering. Pavement really show how masterful their plot development can be. The instrumental break section is, when you pay attention, a tour de force of ensemble playing—especially drums and guitar—that never sounds, well, forced. I, for one, love Malkmus’s singing, but to some ears it could plausibly pass as merely the second-rate delivery that college radio ignorantly demands—for some of the song; yet the full-throttle pitch accuracy of the song’s climax puts the whole thing in perspective. The sudden yelling at “no big hair” is humorous, but also points out that physical stipulations could be truly hurtful, making the mawkishness risk of “songs mean a lot when songs are bought, and so are you” pay off in context, and finally infusing “career, career” with emotion that could pass as somewhat agonized resignation as easily as light humor. At that point, the return to that “ooh-ooh” hook reads as positively triumphant.

1995

"Ticking" Loud Lucy
San Francisco's KITS "Live 105" represented my last consensual relationship with a broadcast radio station—where DJs seemed to have a choice in what they played, etc. I can't quite say I was a Green Day fan, but the sound of the station in 1995 was that everything sounded like Green Day, or *was* Green Day, and you could do a lot worse; Green Day came from a bona fide exciting local scene in Oakland. From a parallel Chicago indie pop scene, Loud Lucy's "Ticking" was one of many respectable one-hit wonders I knew from that radio station, and it still sounds plenty okay today.

"Skinny Hot Rod" The Sugarplastic
The Sugarplastic were another certifiable *scene* band—from the Silver Lake district of Los Angeles, associated particularly with the great venue Spaceland. They get a big, polychromatic sound for being a not very histrionic three-piece; they bear a somewhat accidental vocal resemblance to XTC or Talking Heads, but were actually gigantic Pixies fans.

"Alone + Easy Target" Foo Fighters
Did anybody know Dave Grohl was going to be Mr. Entertainment? It's interesting that amid an industry of bands duking it out to become the most cheerlessly bilious
in Nirvana'a wake, the Foo Fighters didn't buy in, taking a fairly upbeat, traditional
rock course.

"Grounded" Pavement
No pop act ever had more natural ease at rejecting or parodying prevailing aesthetics than Pavement. From their album art, rendered in found palatable images caked with white-out and scraped with an X-Acto blade to frame Pavement's branding, to their sounds-like-a-first-take sound, Pavement didn't give the impression of trying to please everyone, and in fact do not. I happen to be a fan. *Wowee Zowee* was controversial for most fans—something like a cross between T.S. Eliot and Danny Kirwan–era Fleetwood Mac—though right in the sweet spot for me.

"Allyson 23" Anton Barbeau and the Joy Boys
This is a rapid-fire assault of pure enthusiasm; you don't feel any hesitation to think
"power pop." A zillion little amusing lines go by a mile a minute—somewhere in there is "She knows the secrets of the squirrels/Knows my nuts are buried deep."

"Some Might Say" Oasis
(What's the Story) Morning Glory was great. For me, I think it was the very last rock album that had song after song that sounded like it was going to be a hit, and was. The singing has that somewhat rare quality that it's undeniably superior, yet pretty much does not scream "smart person." It makes you ponder what commodity this kind of song is; there's definitely a component of it being the old, good way music used to be—so, a nostalgia risk—but, in a more positive light, a reminder that no frills is often good frills.

"Fanfare" Eric Matthews
That's about as convoluted as you can make a unison horn chart and still qualify as a pop hook; well done. The liner notes are worth reading: an announcement of a new talent that renders other acts so much noise, done in a circa-1960 style that only functions as parody because no one dares that much audaciousness anymore. Eric has one of the great voices, featured on 1994's brilliant *Cardinal* project.

"Sad Tomorrow" The Muffs
The Muffs had an uncommon flair for simple, catchy melodies, which were delivered in Kim Shattuck's almost comically sneering adolescent rasp. There were a whole lot of bands doing very similar guitar rock with a punky delivery around this time (can't imagine why!), but I vote these folks near the top of the heap.

"1979" Smashing Pumpkins
I feel the pain of people who don't like the Smashing Pumpkins; Billy Corgan comes off more pretentious in interviews than is justified by any particular innovation or distinction. Yet I like what many consider their lowest moments: "despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage" (nice hook) and "cleanliness is godliness and God is empty…just like me!" (nice adolescent rant). But nobody doesn't like "1979." For me it nails the feeling of realizing that a whole social world is gone into thin air.

"Stutter" Elastica
It starts with two different, perfectly complementary fuzzed-up guitars —a good lesson in how to get a lot of white noise to sit well in a mix. I believe the "stutter" is a male's reaction to trouble exercising a certain interpersonal obligation. Not your everyday subject. I chatted Elastica up sharing a bill in England in 1994; at the time they were on the *cover* of *NME* on the strength of *one single*. I whined that in America, even the hottest band could expect to put out several albums before getting that much press, which was mostly true. Looking back, the single must have been "Connection."

"The Blunderbuss" Brad Jones
I know about this terrific Brad Jones album because the illustrious *Mojo* magazine once picked both it and something by a band of mine

in an article called "'90s Powerpop." Brad's album *Gilt-Flake* is a good showcase for what are obviously formidable production skills, and the vision of the West being won by showboating homicidal maniacs is surreally memorable.

"Sparky's Dream" Teenage Fanclub
I always start out indifferent to Teenage Fanclub albums, and about 50% of the time end up loving them (and not disliking the other 50%). *Grand Prix* is their most consistent whole record so far. I always want to jump to the conclusion that they should shift focus to the obvious vocal gifts of Norman Blake, but this is the second album in a row where I picked a Gerard Love number as the standout. But, "Neil Jung," too, for sure.

"Santa Monica" Everclear
There's sort of a jaunty low-life aura to this one. The singer wants to forget the "ghost" who left him, go to the west coast, see some palm trees, "swim out past the breakers," and "watch the world die." It's so catchy there's not really such a thing as not liking it, but why would the world be dying even were our lad to care to watch it do so? There's something about a "fire" in there. Let's hope he doesn't settle in Topanga Canyon.

"Apathy…Superstar!?" P.M. Dawn
Don't call it "Christian R&B"; the *Jesus Wept* album was closer to hip-hop-influenced English shoe-gazer acts, and the lyrical approach was more personal and complex. It's atheist-approved! The blissful sonics and voice—in an insistent, insinuating rhyme pattern—lead to the unusually expressive, "Everything's all right/Almost everyone I know believes in God," revealing a gift for telling the truth not just about what one believes, but how it feels to believe it. "Sympathy *should* be a superstar."

"In the Veins" Semisonic
This was after the group Trip Shakespeare, and before the Semisonic of "Closing Time" fame. I think the band might actually have been called Pleasure; the reissue I finally found it on is credited as "Pleasure e.p." by Semisonic. This is a *big,* tough guitar riff number—unexpectedly so, given the surrounding bands' less aggressive styles. Semisonic wrote very decent words, and these are a compelling meditation on the physical nature of mentality: "It's amazing all the things a self contains/Peace is in the veins."

"Planet Telex" Radiohead
I actively disliked Radiohead until this song. Hated "Creep," was indifferent at best to "Fake Plastic Trees" and "High and Dry." But here all the positives are in place: the willingness to go out on a limb in the production (vocals and drums recorded *way* in the red), major playing off minor playing off tritone, the something-is-terribly-wrong

theme: “Everything is broken/Everyone is broken/Why can’t you forget?”

“Try Try Try” Julian Cope
This has everything a giant mainstream hit by, say, the Spin Doctors should have, and then some. But Julian Cope is a driven individual and it’s hard to imagine him getting enough of the hit-making machinery greased to actually pull it off. I’ve come to expect the words have something to do with wanting to fly free of the Christian dispensation. I wouldn’t want to speak for the man about what he feels is holding him back, if indeed I’m even getting that much right, but whatever is the case, Julian has an acute sense of what is at stake in, shall we say, belief systems.

“You Could Make a Killing” Aimee Mann
“I know it’s neither deep nor tragic/Simply that you have to have it” is an incisive description of addiction, or maybe desire in general. Set to ravishing music. Julianna Hatfield’s backing vocals are an inspired persona here, her youthful voice creating more of an impression of kids forging the truth of their experience than of the kind of wizened bloodshedding that can keep the genre a bit maudlin.

“King of the Kerb” Echobelly
This is probably the very best of the massive mid-nineties rock productions. Sonya Madan has a sweet voice and usually applies it to provocative subject matter; Echobelly usually have that particular edge to them. In this case, the subject seems to be the abusiveness of a certain class of people who have “somebody out there doing it for” them, promising that “a little protection is all that you need.” HMOs, I’m guessing.

“Philosophy” Ben Folds Five
I remember telling *everyone* “You *have* to hear Ben Folds Five,” more emphatically than I can remember doing with any other debut album. The piano playing is, for one thing, so clearly outstanding that you almost can’t go wrong, and the fact that it’s set in more or less a three-piece punk band seals the deal. I’ll go so far as to say that “Philosophy” contains my single favorite piano performance on any recording. My conjecture is that in this song, the Statue of Liberty is talking, yet it’s also about someone evaluating a group of friends according to whether each has proper philosophical moorings or not—don’t worry, it all makes perfect sense when you hear the song.

1996

"Jumping Fences" The Olivia Tremor Control
If, like me, you were never the right person for "electronica," the buzz in 1996 was the Elephant Six music collective, whose first stars were the Olivia Tremor Control and Neutral Milk Hotel. The *Dusk at Cubist Castle* project was authentically experimental, in both its unorthodox spirit and its lack of obvious effort to trim the tedious parts. "Jumping Fences" is a sunny 1970-ish pop song with E6 elements like Wilsonesque barbershop harmonies and ragtag appearances of percussion and instrumental flourishes—and it constitutes an amazing two-minute slice of *Cubist Castle* that, loose though it may be, proves these are music people with good ears, good instincts, and real chops.

"Last Man Alive" Grifters
David Shouse's vocals on "Last Man Alive" are so distinctive and timeless that it could only be in a year like 1996 that they got lost in the shuffle: a year where thousands of sometimes very decent post-grunge guitar bands were flying at the wall, and none were sticking. Based in Memphis, they shared a gruff yet oddly lighthearted nihilism with fellow travelers like Archers of Loaf, but had a way with lyrical moments better suited to capturing mass attention. It sounds farfetched until you hear the song, but it's hard for me to imagine anyone, after just one hearing, not wanting to sing along with, "As for me, of course I'm enraptured by the lilting sounds of Colorblind James."

"Poor Fractured Atlas" Elvis Costello
At an L.A. show, E.C. introduced this by commenting on a London daily's complaint about the similarity to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata": "You can't put anything past them." That such an obviously deliberate music reference could be misidentified as unconscious plagiarism emphasizes that, in music, you can never be very sure who's listening for what—and Elvis doesn't always make it easy for people. A grand master of melody and new wave pop, he gives the frequent impression of indifference to those in favor of genre-hopping mannerism. No doubt it can be frustrating work; only so many listeners are fluent enough to appreciate how really good he can be at all of bossa nova, country, soul, light classical, what have you—yet not so immersed that a contribution of imperfect fluency is superfluous. This sonata filtered through piano-bar soul/gospel is the kind of utilitarian blend that works the best for me. The P.C. anti-macho lyrics are not his best full set, but as a long setup for the climactic repetition of "a woman wouldn't understand it," they do the job.

"Ocean" Sebadoh
The sing-songiest of all Sebadoh songs still supplies more

psychological backstory than the average ten songs. By the time we get to "It's dumb to even think I had that power/And we haven't been that close in a while," we know these people's psychologies better than two real people after years of therapy. That solo fuzz guitar tag that ends with the three quarter notes is immortal.

"Navy Bean" Tracy Bonham
I wasn't that much of a fan of the near-novelty smash "Mother, Mother," but I thought *The Burdens of Being Upright* was for the most part a typically impressive result from the Fort Apache world; "The One" was exceptional, and "Navy Bean" was exceptionally exceptional. Unabashedly tuneful for an angry, skittish punk number, I think it's about something like one individual directing another to "parade around" in revealing clothes, e.g., something as small as a navy bean. I feel like I don't quite get it, and I don't even know if the point is agitation over being the parader, but hey, count me in, I think.

"Been It" The Cardigans
The high-gloss Betty Boop rock of "Lovefool" caught the ears of millions of the types of fans who would probably want nothing to do with the throttling rhythm section and cynicism of "Been It," or most of the rest of the material from the audacious, generally outstanding *First Band on the Moon.*

"Cut-Out Witch" Guided By Voices
The first non–low-fi GBV release is gratingly trebly, which in context I think has to be hailed as a victory; they were, as Jack Black would say, still sticking it to the man. Yet another of Pollard's songs about supernatural women, this one may be the Fate in charge of album releases going into cut-out bins (there's also "Lord of Overstock"). We owe Pollard a debt for forcing the world to continue to value guitar riffs this cool.

"6th Avenue Heartache" The Wallflowers
I must say, Jakob Dylan and Adam Duritz's vocal harmonies on this are sensational. I never get tired of listening to them—which if you know this 5:30 song, is lucky. The words aren't a technical tour de force, but evoke a structural intensity by ostensibly treating a legacy inherited from a homeless street musician who dies one day, in a way that fades in and out of focus with respect to Jakob's formidable real family legacy. The slide guitar sounds like George Harrison's work with Dylan père circa 1970, e.g., "If Not for You."

"Please Return It" The Posies
Most great artists define a new and unique region of hell. Led Zeppelin hell is 30 minutes of echoey jamming broken up by two minutes of lyrics about hobbits. Posies hell is seven minutes of sludgy, unparseable drop-string minor chords with scenery-chewing regret

over personal excesses, in harmony. “Please Return It” threatens to be that, but as usually happens with them, turns out to be really good thanks to intangibles all hitting right, like the extra lyric repetition in “When we live the life we live/It’s never ours completely/Not completely.” The end chant of “There’s an upside, there has to be an upside” captures something real about how desperation feels.

“How Do I Understand My Motorman” Julian Cope
This lost treasure sounds like it was recorded on cassette, and by what redaction the word “understand” in the title replaces the “know” of the sterling hook line that could only have ever been “How do I know my motorman?” is as much a mystery to me as how the concept of knowing one’s motorman should adjust my spirituality. I think the overall lyrical point here is that Christians going to church in their drab clothes bespeak an oppressive tolerance of insufficient “improvement” on God’s part, as if we might fire the current God and hire a better one. Born-again druid Julian was probably far from ruling that out. To me it sounds like Edwardian spiritualism warmed over, but I adore the song, and “When blabbermouth came down from the sky” made me laugh out loud.

“New Test Leper” R.E.M.
“I can’t say that I love Jesus/That would be a hollow claim” begins this fairly naturalistic depiction of confrontation with a hostile “studio audience,” to whom the narrator suggests, “Call me a leper.” But now, did this audience deserve a slap like that, or is it okay enough for them not to profess love for him, because that would be a hollow claim? Martyrdom: still tricky business in 1996. “New Test Leper’s” lovely Dylan-based swing is uncomplicated, but nuanced with perfect intelligence in the best *Murmur* tradition.

“Stay Where You Are” Sleater-Kinney
The vocals are a whining Gordian knot of interwoven petulance, a strangely compelling satanic inverse of “We Got the Beat.”

“Miracle Medicine” Jason Falkner
Something of a wizard of surprise-chord-change pop rock, Jason Falkner’s promise in Jellyfish is fulfilled on *Presents Author Unknown.* The lyrics are surprising, too: doctors not being able to give him the right medicine as a metaphor for…doctors not being able to give him the right medicine! Stick it to Dr. Man.

“You’re One” Imperial Teen
Roddy Bottum’s Imperial Teen was an ear-opening revelation after Faith No More for, oh, people who followed music before 1985 Beastie Boys. They have a way with insistent repetition closely related to that of the Feelies. “You’re One” is apparently “about Kurt Cobain,” according to the *New York Times;* that would never have been obvious to me, but one hilarious biz detail is this observation of a poorly

attended show: “If there’s no ears, then there’s no sound/Then there’s no tree, then there’s no ground.” Steve McDonald from Redd Kross was an inspired choice for producer, whose technique I fantasize started and ended with pegging every track into the red.

“Radiation Vibe” Fountains of Wayne
I enjoyed this album while under the impression that they were the same people who did the spot-on music for the film *That Thing You Do;* if that’s not really true, well, when the subject is loving music, life is too short to check facts. “Radiation Vibe” is not quite a grabber until the chorus, but what a chorus: “It’s a radiation vibe I’m grooving on” positively seizes ownership of the 1-5-4 change as if exploiting its real potential for the first time.

“The Speed of Things” Robyn Hitchcock
I’ll say it again: Robyn is a deep cat. The “grow wings”/“grow horns” verse is a just slightly embarrassing ending to what is otherwise a gleaming jewel in the Hitchcock song catalog. The repeated “at the speed of things” resolution is a magical incantation. I have young children, and “I fed you in your chair this morning/You made a mess of everything/By afternoon, you drove a sports car/You were driving at the speed of things” captures the implacable mystery of time’s passing in a way that can choke me up. The tune, part Elizabethan harpsichord, part Celtic folk, is truly a thing of beauty.

“Seeing Other People” Belle and Sebastian
My favorite line is “And you can’t understand why all the other boys are going for the new, tall, elegant rich kids” (or “kid”?), but every line announces that Stuart Murdock is a force, as does the instrumentation that will have nothing to do with hard rock; I want to credit Vince Guaraldi with some influence. Ordinarily I would think I’m reading far too much into it were I to observe that “Seeing other people, at least that’s what we say we are doing” has an overtone of *really seeing* other people, as in, acknowledging the reality of their feelings—that’s what we *say* we’re doing. With Belle and Sebastian, I’m tempted to give them the benefit of the doubt.

“Naomi” Neutral Milk Hotel
This devastatingly gorgeous recording is one of my favorite musical translations of the feeling of being ravished by beauty. The “one billion” this and “one billion” that are in reasonable service of the sheer overwhelming breathlessness of it all: “Your prettiness is seeping through/Out from the dress I took from you.” *Avery Island* sounds like everything was recorded deep into saturation, which is just the right thing for the exhilarating launch moment leading into “I’m watching Naomi, full bloom.”

“Crosseyed” Brendan Benson
A whole lot of people know who Brendan Benson is these days, as the

co-pilot of the Raconteurs, but at the time, no one really noticed his debut *One Mississippi* except as a somewhat high-profile Virgin Records flop—but that was the golden age of bands going through the mill, so that kind of thing wasn't even really news. I recall it being near chance that I pulled it out of the bargain bin on the strength of some Jason Falkner ghostwriting, and was I glad I did. The album has its slack moments compared with later work, but almost right away there's one of those Benson moments that burns as brightly as anything: "Bird's Eye View." The verse almost exactly prefigures Ted Leo and the Pharmacists ("You can't escape the jails or the crucifier's nails/So just have a seat, breathe slowly and deeply/Repeat after me, I'm sorry"—could that be straight off *Tyranny of Distance,* or what?), and then there's the glorious chorale of "so dress your sons and daughters in neutral colors and pray." Bonus martyrdom shout-outs to Messrs. Cope and Stipe! For all of that, the prize is "Crosseyed," with its slow burn on "Twitchy lady, so lovely with your short hair/Where do you come from, where are you going?" To some extent, I can defend my intense love for this song. "My friends think you're ugly; they don't see what I see" would skirt abusiveness if those words were actually conveyed socially, but the point here is to drive the attraction completely outside the purview of social mediation, outside the physical, to the realm of a pure—to use a sadly overused word—connection. I don't mean to be sleazy when I suggest that there's an admirable assertion that indifference to physical perfection can work as cheap thrills: "She was crooked and bent, with her eyes half shut/ And her dirty mouth was open just a little." Beyond the range of what I can articulate, some musical passages strike me as so perfect I can offer no explanation other than that part of my soul must be shaped that way at some hard-wired level; and this partakes of that.

1997

"MMMBop" Hanson
I usually consider 1997 the best year of my life (first full year spent with my wife Kristine), and 1997 was the last year of a generally very good five-year stretch for pop rock music. Certainly the average number one hit of any of the twenty prior years was a bloodless, unmusical, and forgettable effort compared with Hanson's "MMMBop," a rare case of entirely well-deserved mass appeal. Of course it's based on the Jackson Five, but it's well short of plagiaristic, and cunning in its angle of divergence: the lyrics, interestingly, don't traffic slickly in feelings and entertainment like J5, they critique. The word "MMMBop" is the heartbeat in which relationships you thought would last can be gone: "Keep planting to find out which one grows/ It's a secret no one knows." They riff on that with "Can you tell me?/ Oh yeah, you say you can/But you don't know," which is rather impressive hardball for literal teenagers. And as everyone already knows, the performance is fabulous.

"Standing in the Doorway" Bob Dylan
Pound for pound, it might ring truer than any other song about carrying a torch for past requited love. By itself, the line "I got nothin' to go back to now" speaks quite a bit—we've heard lines like it before, but not so strategically situated; here it says: the relationship *became* where the singer came from. Again, "Last night I danced with a stranger/But she just reminded me you were the one" is, in a way, traveled lyrical territory, but the rightness of Dylan's word choices achieves a crisp intensity: e.g., he didn't *decide* it, her being someone else *reminded* him of what can never be undecided. Dylan sounds closer to 150 years old on this record than on the more recent ones, and that can take some getting used to, but in the end it opens up real opportunities for vocal tunefulness, as on "crying" whenever "You left me standing in the doorway crying" comes around.

"Brimful of Asha" Cornershop
It may not have that much to do with Indian inflection, but the way Tjinder Singh chews the syllables on "Brimful of Asha on the 45" is essential to the catchiness here. And you'd sort of have to be of Indian ethnicity to come up with the idea of a song about Bollywood playback singers; at least, it's difficult to imagine, say, an American group writing a song about Marni Nixon.

"Tracy" [edit] Mogwai
Nostalgia for mid-nineties music by Mogwai, or Tortoise, must be the ultimate postmodern emotion. My editing of the elegantly modulated slow-pan cinematics of "Tracy" for iPod listening is second in fiendish laboratory success only to my 5:45 version of Pink Floyd's "Dogs." It's compressed enough so that you can hear that phone bit about not

even wanting to think about what would happen if they don't take care of whatever it is. Hey, it screams million-seller to me now!

"If I Think of Love" OP8
Lisa Germano, Howe Gelb (Giant Sand), and Calexico people did the sparkling one-off album *Slush,* which is among my favorites from the sum of the parts. Germano's key contribution is this string of borderline non-sequitur phrases with an indefinable directness.

"Already Over Me" The Rolling Stones
It gives me no pleasure to reward lyrics as bad as "When you laughed, I just cried/When you left, I just died," or vocals this overacted, but at the end of the day I like this song quite a bit; I'd feel that spark of kinship with anyone else who picked this as one of the Stones' in-decline successes. The chorus is just such a hook.

"I'm Gonna See You" that dog.
Producer Brad Wood deserves some credit for the era's quality results as the go-to person for giving acts groomed for low-fi audiences pretty dependably punchy recordings. Near the top of that heap was the nineties version of "We've Only Just Begun," the relationship-inaugurating "I'm Gonna See You" ("I'm gonna see you in the morning…I'm gonna see you when you're boring"). It's actually a very snappy tune—much more so than that fragment suggests; the attendant Hadens and Waronker acquit themselves admirably.

"Montreal" Of Montreal
The Kevin Barnes of this record is almost unrecognizable as he of *Hissing Fauna, Are You the Destroyer?* who pisses Tris McCall off for doing Outback commercials. This is kind of a cowboy yodel set to unpredictable chord changes, with a disarming ability to telegraph naive emotional vulnerability not completely unlike Daniel Johnston's. There's a curious verisimilitude to the phrasing, "When you told me that this isn't it," and details like "every street sign written in French."

"Hopeless" Future Bible Heroes
Really, no one should attempt disco except Stephin and Claudia, or the apparently also arrestingly gifted Chris Ewen, who gets a giant thumbs-up for that change on "Our dreams are dying of overdoses."

"Start Again" Teenage Fanclub
It always happens: I start out thinking a Teenage Fanclub album is bland, and someone gets me to stick with it, and they end up being right, it's good. *Northern Britain* is one of the not-quite-superb ones, but the harmony clusters here are a prime showcase for Norman Blake, who can be one of rock's best singers, and a winning motif of truncating measures as if excited to get to the next part sooner.

"You Spoke to Me" Smoking Popes
I initially pegged these guys as an inessential crooner punk novelty act, but I should have realized they were a lot better than that, as the *Destination Failure* album proved. In my defense, there is occasional witlessness in the titling department over at Vatican West. The battering guitar riff rhythm section of "You Spoke to Me" comes in meaning more business than just about anyone, and the vocal dramatization of talking to a favorite band as a backstage fan is exquisitely rendered. The lead guitar's leveraging of the chord cycle for modal scale potential is remarkable.

"Buzzing" The Negro Problem
At the time, when I talked in oh-and-Radiohead-too terms about the Negro Problem, Elliott Smith, and Belle and Sebastian making 1997 a big year, I got enough "huh?" to go around (even for Smith and Belle), but now with Stew's *Passing Strange* as last year's biggest on-Broadway smash, not anymore! I hope a number of gleaming moments from Stew's indie-band past don't get completely eclipsed—"Buzzing" being one of those. I'm not positive I know what "buzzing" is (like, being buzzed, high, not thinking clearly?), but it's a devastating lyric set, climaxing with lacerating and surreal cynicism about attitudes toward African American celebrity: "Come celebrate the chocolate face!" The whole album is well worth getting to know; the musical palette is astounding. Oh, I was convinced to relocate Belle and Sebastian to 1996, for those keeping score.

"Chatfield Manor" Mike Keneally and Beer for Dolphins
All 8:16 of this prog rock masterpiece is quality music; any stretch that isn't an eminently respectable hook is an opportunity for even more respectable guitar playing. I'm not talking about just fast notes, either; this is highly listenable as virtuoso material goes. A few people will be getting nervous when the lyrics commence with "There's a place where I go/When I go to a place"; is this, like, a bad stoner humor thing? Not so; it's a straight-up thank you song to someone who offers the band a place to sleep when on the road. Stay with it. You *will* be singing along with "Let's go up the freeway/Hang a left/Hang a right/Chatfield Manor." Thanks much to Kenny Kessel for introducing me to Mr. K.

"Seems So" Apples in Stereo
Pure pop doesn't get any more blindingly enjoyable than this. There's almost something of a Jerome Kern confection in the whole-step descents, as well as more obvious channeling of 1965 Beatles and Byrds. The cycles through the "dozed off on my pillow," "whole thing from my window" pattern hit with such miraculous perfection that you're put under the temporary impression that no one else is doing music quite right.

"Let Down" Radiohead

The distinctive sonics of *OK Computer* hit a glacial, reverberating, ringing stride on "Let Down," a less prominent cut than "Karma Police" or "Paranoid Android," but the one that captures the indefinable emotional tug that is the group's most important value added. The chorus is an unusual construction; it has its impact on the words "let down," then dissipates, doesn't really go anywhere. Yet somehow the song manages to stage things such that every time the crescendo comes back around, it's with more anticipation and climax.

"Flaming Pie" Paul McCartney

I *love* this song. The whole *Flaming Pie* album is outstanding—maybe the best overall McCartney album. The song "Flaming Pie" recaptures the Beatle-era confidence of someone who is reckless and never goes wrong. The straight New Orleans piano break? Why not? The mid-chorus jolt into rhythm section off-counts? It stays. "I took my brains out and stretched them on the rack/Now I'm not so sure I'm ever going to get them back": that's a powerfully constructed descent, and those are lyrics that get things careening off a cliff in a way the 1997 Mick Jagger ought to study.

"Jane of the Waking Universe" Guided By Voices

This is another important spike in the mountain for GBV's ascent to classic status. It's another of Robert Pollard's occasional full-blown visions of female deity, this one turning just a bit pagan and silly with "the devil's bride" (as Mr. Pollard once said in a different mood, I am a scientist), but hey, I'm all for the universe waking. Great production touch: the high end roll-off on the vocal tracks singing the title line.

"Rose Parade" Elliott Smith

An apparently unusually sensitive soul, Elliott Smith had his share of emotional difficulties, but he was also unquestionably one of a tiny minority of lyricists who were not just serving sung verse—which is really the highest calling songwriters ought to be expected to hear—but were genuinely onto something. Rather, it was the music that seemed to serve Elliott's communication, which is a rare impression to achieve. The specific coup here is those three little descending guitar notes, as on "watch the parade," which seems perfect tone poetry for the "yes, but" sentiment of the lyrics. There's nothing wrong with the Rose Parade per se, "It's just that everyone's interest is stronger than mine." But the weak interest is in the spirit of the crowd that displaces one's humanity. Elliott wants you to follow him down to the parade to learn how not to get caught up in parades, because you won't know at the time if they're a Nuremberg rally as we recognize those today or something wonderful and invigorating, just as those participants didn't know.

1998

"Teardrop" Massive Attack
There was just enough techno/sample permeation out there in 1998 to start thinking, crap, is this stuff really going to take over? I had a little fear of the unknown. The Nirvana effect was winding down in 1998; people who like pop rock to be obsolete were getting all frisky. "Teardrop" is an obviously successful track, with Elizabeth Fraser from Cocteau Twins doing some enchanting vocals, but I guess in the world of trip hop that approaches these matters in a way that's alien to me, one understands the *really important* achievements to be, first, the sample drum beat, and, second, the guest remixes that sometimes get rid of the vocal entirely. There's not a thing wrong with that drum track, with the cool vinyl crackle sound and all, but I think you have to be British to hang on the details of the beats/remix world as lovingly as a deeply alcoholic 1958 Frank Sinatra fan ever tracked his master's voice. Techno didn't exactly start going away after 1998, but it did stop taking over. Little squelchy drum machine tracks on Aimee Mann records were going to be okay for some time, but any more "jungle" backing tracks on Bowie records would now be right out of the question.

"Call Me Dave" John Easdale
"When you call me, and you will" is a splendid hook; you feel it when you realize you've waited most of the song for it to come around again. Championed by the late great Greg Dwinnell, there's something uniquely special about John Easdale that I've never quite put my finger on, but he's extremely personable—you expect him to be more gruff than is the reality—and he has an incredible ear for picking good cover tunes—or, I should say, scooping me on my own cover ideas. Oh, that's Clem Burke from Blondie on drums.

"Celebrity Skin" Hole
Still growling words and changing power chords very much like the Kurt of 1991, Courtney is also still bewailing the seediness and emptiness of celebrity very much like the Courtney of *Miss World.* I guess I'm still interested; "Might Have Been," "Never Was," and "Forgotten" introducing themselves around the room is a funny touch, and "There's only us here now" is a good restatement minus the flip tone.

"Circles" Soul Coughing
Mitch Easter alerted me to Tchad Blake's importance as a latter day engineer, and this happens to be the recording where I feel like I'm most aware of hearing him do his thing: big low end, clever use of junky instrument sounds. It's also a very catchy tune, and Soul Coughing have their insightful moments ("Blame is the cure/Cure anything").

“Tell Him” Lauryn Hill
There’s a whole lot of Jesus here for such a critics’ favorite. A beautiful, somewhat unlikely Martin-sounding guitar pattern supports a bouquet of ensemble soul emoting, plenty of First Corinthians, and an effortless way with words in general (“Make me unselfish without being blind”).

“Car Wheels on a Gravel Road” Lucinda Williams
Painterly details from the title on down tell the story of non-urban inattentiveness as it feels to a child somewhere within driving distance of “Jackson”: “a little bit of dirt mixed with tears.” Steve Earle’s hard-drinking mandolin sonics are irresistible to the ear.

“Flagpole Sitta” Harvey Danger
As close to a crazy, juvenile, grass-roots radio smash hit as can happen in the last decade or so, this song has rightfully infiltrated film and TV wherever there’s a call for an infusion of recklessness. You’ve probably heard it: “I’m not sick, but I’m not well,” “Paranoia, paranoia, everybody’s coming to get me.”

“Danny Boy” Rufus Wainwright
Rufus’s debut is undeniably remarkable, though not in any bludgeoningly attention-getting way. Mostly it’s his singing, which harkens back to pre-rock times: I keep thinking of Al Jolson. Am I hearing hammered dulcimer or is that a piano? I ordinarily don’t like hammered dulcimer, but it works in a Jon Brion production where everything seems to have an ironic wink to it, better than where musicians are too high on the Appalachiana of it to notice the notes are running together inconveniently. The song is long and has almost no structural climaxes, but the near-drone of the vocal, holding notes so as to fill in as much silence as possible, simply won’t take no for an answer to emotional engagement. The lyrics are imperfect, but there’s certainly somebody home, e.g., in a thoughtful if unforthcoming line like “My smile, a trick/Tricking me and trying not to scare you.”

“Liar” Royal Trux
Purchasing a Pussy Galore record was, I think, the worst I’ve ever felt ripped off as a music buyer, and the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion was pretty decent but a little too performance art for me. So it was a bit of a surprise for me to like Royal Trux’s *Accelerator* so much. The way they tear down and reassemble the components of a trashy rock song —the completely unexpected drum pattern, gated loudness-curve fuzz guitar, volume swell accents—is inspired and ends up sounding strangely together and powerful on a car stereo next to more by-the-numbers crunchy rock productions.

“Sad Professor” R.E.M.

With its dubiously coherent opening track and Bill Berry void, it's easy to identify *Up* as a trouble sign for R.E.M., but really this is how far back you currently have to go to get obviously great Stipe lyrics. How good is "float their malcontent"? Did he make that up? In a minimalist way, a very good track musically, too.

"Black Horse" Gastr del Sol
An intricately festive and folky string instrumental call-and-response with mostly Celtic but also what I want to call Balkan overtones—not that much like Squirrel Bait—resolves after a minute or two into a crystalline modern-compositiony plucked-guitar ensemble section. A lovely island of hand-wrought music amid the laptops.

"Much Against Everyone's Advice" Soulwax
Concocted by a Belgian duo using an "electronica" approach, "Much Against Everyone's Advice" is really state-of-the-art straight, melodically adventurous power pop. The CD packaging alone is worth the admission price: all the songs are given their own distressed vintage 45 graphics within the booklet.

"King of Carrot Flowers" Neutral Milk Hotel
My band played at the San Francisco *Terrastock* in 1998—a very memorable musical experience—and NMH were a highlight despite loud rock not being the best way to listen to them. I'm one of the few people who were a little more taken with 1996's *On Avery Island,* but "King of Carrot Flowers" is one of those songs you never hear anyone admit to not liking. "Mom would stick a fork right into Daddy's shoulder…As we lay and learned what each other's bodies were for" is somewhere between comical and horribly vivid.

"Nobody's Fault But My Own" Beck
I was a little on the fence about Beck until *Mutations,* which emphatically won me over. Putting out a moralistic, non–hip-hop art rock album at that point in his career showed real nerve. Nigel Godrich's "Within You, Without You" sonics are impeccable.

"Love Is" Myracle Brah
Here is about as tight a compaction of power pop as you can get—Mersey beat, summer of love, "Hurdy Gurdy Man" guitar and "Magical Mystery Tour" harmonies all piled into a 1:53 phone booth. Visitors to *Mojo* magazine's "'90s Powerpop Buyer's Guide" will figure out why I know about this one.

"I've Got a Feeling" Ivy
This collaboration between the esteemed Adam Schlesinger and Parisienne Dominique Durand is almost as instantly and universally recognizable as a gorgeous song as "There She Goes" by the La's, and that's really saying something.

“Cornerstone” Richard X. Heyman
A simple but strangely compelling one-chord groove introduces an affecting vocal harmony number about lifelong reflection. There’s a Christian motif where “the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (as I hear it, Jesus as advocate for society’s outcasts); that may be this concept and the “building” a church, or it may not be that. But one way or another I would expect Heyman and Roger McGuinn to get along.

“Johnny Feelgood” Liz Phair
For some reason often considered a dud, the first thing that strikes me about *Whitechocolatespaceegg* is how great it sounds—the kind of recording that reminds you how much more can ordinarily be expected from this period than from, for instance, the mid-1980s. Liz had gotten into a desperate-appearing pattern of casting around for different producers, all of whom sound very respectable, especially good old Brad Wood on this one. The dub breakdown is sonically fun without being hokey, and Liz hasn’t run out of good girl talk.

“Reaching One” Girl Bros.
This is Wendy and Lisa from Prince and the Revolution. I don’t know how busy they’ve been keeping themselves with music in general, but this is a dazzling composition from a very nice little album. The verse is the star, with the hanging major sevenths on “here I go again.” And you know what? It’s got a great beat! Just a very compelling synthetic(-sounding) rhythm section composition. I think I’ve become repentant since complaining about people focusing on drum beats; part of the original charter for rock and roll was that it had a great beat that the squares didn’t dig, right? Anyway, I’m not square enough not to love this low, lean shuffle, and the complicated missing-you emotions of “It’s like something I don’t want, but I don’t want to end,” and “When I think that I’ve got something new to say/I remember that it’s the same thing I said yesterday.” That lowness and leanness is, by the way, no doubt due in part to our man Tchad Blake at the controls.

1999

"I Want It That Way" Backstreet Boys
Those boy singing groups were the start of a weird mutation in pop entertainment. Let's start by saying that although you didn't need better than workaday results on the music end—they were cute enough boys or they weren't, period—that didn't prevent some practitioners from rising to very respectable results like the drill-team crisp "I Want It That Way." But here's the weird part. Past generations grew out of being a teen music audience and into being an adult music audience. This generation grew out of being a teen music audience and into being teen music impresarios—witness *American Idol.* The passage from a variety show world to a reality show world entails the corollary that we've entered an era where there is actually far less demand to see a top singer perform on TV than there is to see amateurs audition for a chance to participate in the star-making machinery that would theoretically result in that aforementioned TV appearance. For which there is almost no actual demand. And people wonder why the economy's collapsing.

"You Are Invited" The Dismemberment Plan
Besides boy singing groups, 1999 was an important ascendancy year for the Internet listening community—Pitchfork Media, for instance, and the Amazon.com way of buying music. Pitchfork get a reasonable amount of respect, maybe *slightly* more from non-musicians than musicians (e.g., there is a world of dance music that a world of musicians don't get; Pitchfork bridged that). I like the way it greatly improves in the area of one historical failing of rock criticism as opposed to, say, film criticism: telling how the music made the critic feel. In a way you *have* to if you're aware of competing with the everyone's-a-critic Amazon nation all telling you what *real* people think. A Pitchfork reviewer will say something like, "I liked this Pavement record because it was confusing." I respect that. Sure, in the worst case it skirts buying too much into B.S., especially in the eyes of a musician, but in fact it achieves truth-telling: the point goes to Pitchfork here. I would never have given Dismemberment Plan a second thought if it weren't for Pitchfork, and this is a terrific, personable little story song. It threatens from another angle to be loathed by musicians as one of those drum machine novelty numbers (compare the industry of today that is LCD Soundsystem), but with an awesome enough band-comes-in moment to win all the hearts in any room.

"Pressure Zone" Beck
Just a bit back to hip-hop territory after the excellent alt-rock *Mutations,* Beck is able to incorporate a few electronica sounds into a diamond-hard groove and continually developing songwriting muscle. There are those frequently appropriated ooh-la-las that come straight out of "You Won't See Me" in there—I always consider that a good

sign.

"It's Always Never" Outrageous Cherry
Like a dream of a sixties art film whose title sequence haunts you for life, "It's Always Never" has a disorienting, echoey, nihilistic edge to it, but is melodically inspired and has a strange demimonde beauty. I'm usually impressed when I happen upon results from this group that has yet to really hit a career stride.

"Candyfloss" Wilco
Summerteeth intensifies the challenge to respond to Wilco songs as poetry. I have to work at connecting; a line like "I believe it's just because Daddy's payday is not enough" is very good; I don't quite know what to do with "She begs me not to hit her." Some of my favorite art treats violence, but in art about violence, the bar is higher for being clear and careful. That's "She's a Jar," which I consider musically so-so; fortunately there's "Candyfloss," which I consider musically exceptional (and somehow old-fashioned, though I can't put my finger on which old fashion)—and, lyrically, lightweight but more obviously smart in its rendering. "I live my life like I wasn't invited" is a great one-liner.

"When My Boy Walks Down the Street" The Magnetic Fields
69 Love Songs was an earthshaking event—the most important album release of 1999 and a few years hence. In part, its importance lies merely in its being so long yet so consistently good. I have to think it inspired other large projects, like Sufjan Stevens's U.S. states series. There's no one focus song (that would be hard with resources spread so thin), but there are probably ten other songs worthy of a best-of-year CD, and I don't recall a single outright dud. Another part of its importance is as a reasonably mainstream release that deliberately dismantles the heterosexual language convention sustained in popular song lyrics. Here Stephin wants the "boy" to be his "wife"; I detect a hint of wryness there, but it still invites the mind to run those numbers.

"The Great Beyond" R.E.M.
Just as in "When My Boy Walks Down the Street," pianos crash in this lyric set, too; what are the odds? This and other hyperbole like "I'm bending spoons, I'm keeping flowers in full bloom" highlight a pretty good chorus that achieves excellence by building momentum over the course of the song. Elsewhere, although it seems to have an aspect of being a sequel to "Man on the Moon," I can't help but react with the thought that Stipe used to be able to do better than book one celestial romanticism like "I've watched the stars fall silent from your eyes"; but the South *will* rise again.

"A Peculiar Noise Called 'Train Director'" The Olivia Tremor Control

I'm just fine insofar as this is *Cubist Castle Part II,* but the really ear-catching innovation here is the 40-second middle eastern sounding horn and woodwind section that closes out this song. That's not found art in some sense, is it? I assume they must have composed and performed it for the occasion. It's amazing.

"Count It 1 2 3" Sesame Street
Similarly to the case of boy groups, *Sesame Street* songs don't require better than workaday music-making; if there are fuzzy, personable puppets who like numbers and letters, all is probably well, no? But that shouldn't preclude the music-makers getting recognition for coming up with something special. Here some crow muppets sing a song about counting (get it?); it's not only an uncommonly snappy pop vocal arrangement, but it's hard not to love the brainy precision of such absurd setups as "We were hanging out at Hooper's Store/ Staring at some salt shakers/We struck up a conversation with Mr. Hanford behind the counter/We said, 'Mr. Hanford, how many salt shakers you got?/'Cause we bet you've got a lot.'"

"Holiday" Jason Falkner
Jason is a talented enough guy to rate endless star gigs, e.g., with Paul McCartney, as well as a post–*OK Computer* Nigel Godrich co-production, with an apparent bare minimum of sales or attempts to generate sales. And *Can You Still Feel?* is such a bizarre—yet remarkable—release. "Holiday"'s jet-setting chord changes and dive-bombing melodic arcs alone somehow achieve tone poetry for a golden child who's constantly frustrating expectations, and the lyrics, more or less, confirm.

"Thursday's Child" David Bowie
I dithered over putting an Anton Barbeau song—that I mixed—at about this position, but in the end I decided that has to be disqualified. But it's a great song: "Third Eye"—check it out, you won't be sorry (not to toot my mixing horn; as pro work, it's barely adequate at best). Bowie's easy-listening "Thursday's Child" did nothing for me on first listen, but eventually got way under my skin. Then again, I'm one of those people who give Bowie a long leash. Like Dylan or Lennon, his later work often makes points that don't compute to listeners who don't have any interest in learning anything from a non-ascendant star, like younger hipsters and older rock critics, and I've only pretended to be an older rock critic for a short time. "Seeing my past to let it go"—is that a nothing line, or is it a pretty insightful line, and you're just not trying?

"Find Yourself Alone" Saltine
Perhaps the last great seven-inch record in the world was Saltine's "Find Yourself Alone"/"Reveal Love" (that's yet another Ken Stringfellow project, in case you don't know). These are two deeply engaging tunes—it's hard to pick the favorite—with FYA's admonishment that the truth has to come in isolation from the social

realm leading by a nose. “This place is dying and they’ve turned the lights on” is a gentle reminder that some well-being depends on the lights not being on, and this leads into the more confrontational “Nobody wants to hear the ravings of a bad drunk/They’re afraid he’ll speak their minds.”

“Socs Hip” [edit] Lilys
This is the most mind-bending song here, and that’s including the Flaming Lips. I can’t find lyrics online, but there’s something like a museum’s “new-found acquisition in sound,” artists of troubled inspiration for whom “the queen of motivation has put out for so long,” dealing with morbid obsessions (“Get off on death or don’t get off at all”). As with the Kinks, there’s some interesting influence here from the first half of the twentieth century—ragtime, crooner jazz, and, as the album art inscrutably proclaims, the project is “now in Abraham’s service.” The biblical Abraham who almost sacrificed his son as God’s test? Is this the Socs (as in “Socials”) gang in the vengeance saga *The Outsiders?* There’s crazy, schizo heaviosity aplenty here. It’s a whopping seven-something minutes, which I edited to about four, deleting the somewhat redundant first verse, and also remastered to pump the bass and bandpass-limit a honky high-mid edge to the vocals. The song doesn’t really deserve that editing by the way. It’s all meat, and paced right; I’m just being radically stingy with air-time here.

“I’d Like That” XTC
They’ve just stayed great. “I’d grow up really high, really high, like a really high thing, say a sunflower” shows a surprising relaxation in Andy Partridge, which becomes him more than what can occasionally come off as a somewhat uptight humanism. Relaxed, but not sloppy: every production hair is right in place on this semi-acoustic joyride through a world of supreme vocal and lyrical cleverness (“I wouldn’t hector if you’d be Helen of Troy/Oh boy”).

“I Try” Macy Gray
Co-dreamed-up as an album venture with evidently very decent producer Andy Slater in the Wallflowers era, before he was Capitol Records president, this is a labor of seventies soul love involving a big biz guy who seems to be a genuine champion of commercially non-obvious musical ventures. All this song needs is the complicated textures of Macy’s voice and the perfectly direct lines, “I try to say goodbye and I choke/Try to walk away and I stumble.”

“Your Redneck Past” Ben Folds Five
It’s all-brilliant writing from here on out. Mr. Folds is back up to the debut album quality here, only replacing the piano sonics with synthesizer. Wasn’t everybody in the late nineties? With prog rock major sevenths meeting “Jocko Homo,” “Your Redneck Past” is, from start to finish, musically inventive and satisfying as well as funny. “Desolé, je suis Americain, please cook my steak again.”

"Repulsion (Show Up Late for Work on Monday)" The Negro Problem
Here Stew is steadily ramping up the fairly short distance from *Post Minstrel Syndrome* to being one of the very top people. So is Heidi. The first song on the wonderful *Joys and Concerns* is sonically uningratiating, with its lack of spatial verisimilitude (some sounds are distant, almost muddy, some sound little and right next to you), but in the end this is sure footing: the right magic for a disorienting yet enlightening mood. Stew's lyrical world addresses one of the more complicated equations of desire, and in this song, the irresistible force of a one-night stand meets the immovable object of morning regret.

"Wise Up" Aimee Mann
Here's one where, if you've seen the film *(Magnolia),* it's hard to separate the song from its place in the movie. It's one of the most unlikely things you'll ever see on film; the cast—Tom Cruise, Jason Robards, etc.—all appear to start singing the lyrics to the song as the track with Aimee's singing plays. An austere piano accompaniment is about as pretty as possible for this glacially paced awakening to a harder-than-expected reality, perhaps ostensibly of alcohol addiction. This is not to be confused with another Aimee song, "Save Me," which was the one nominated for an Academy Award.

"Buggin'" The Flaming Lips
One wishes for words to fail when describing the Flaming Lips, and *The Soft Bulletin* is far from disappointing. "Race for the Prize" proffers an oddly trumped-up praise for competitive medical researchers. "Buggin'" is about mosquitoes biting you and getting squished on the glass surfaces of your car. Curiously, the other songs lie on some approximation of a continuum between heroic conduct and bug bites. At any rate, the real glue uniting these concepts is the most whomping, humongous drum and bass production imaginable. This is compression and distortion gone berserk, and by some miracle it's highly coherent and functional, even when supporting a vast heavens of harmonizing vocals and glistening string synths. I guess Dave Fridmann from Mercury Rev deserves at least some of the credit.

"Here Come July" Scritti Politti
Was I the only one who had no idea Green Gartside was capable of whipping out this 7000 RPM killing machine? It reminds me a little of the Three O'Clock or Sparks in the sense of a hissing, insinuated vocal supported by unexpected speed and drive. This is *some* July that's coming; it's going to "scorch the pavements of all piety and sin." The alarming formula for success in the new dispensation is: "I'll mean the world to you/Maybe I could double all the negatives we know." If you're a power pop fan and you don't know about this one, run, don't walk.

“Teenage FBI” Guided By Voices

Ric Ocasek was an epiphany as the choice to produce the first Weezer album, and for what my two cents are worth, it’s almost as symbiotic a match here. After the several high points of *Mag Earwig!,* a breakthrough Guided By Voices song seemed within striking distance, and to me, “Teenage FBI” is every inch that classic. It took me some introspection to realize this, given the widespread hostility to *Do the Collapse.* I guess it’s just very easy for the story to be that GBV were put on earth to make “low-fi” home level recordings until killjoy Ric Ocasek came along with a big bag of not getting it. Or Bob had just stirred up the right amount of bad blood. But disliking “Teenage FBI” is just wrong. The musicians I know who have an opinion love it enough to cover it with enthusiasm. No points for Pitchfork here.

2000

"Everything in Its Right Place" Radiohead
In 1993 there was one of those "New Faces" articles in *Rolling Stone* magazine introducing, among other acts, Liz Phair, Radiohead, and the Loud Family! Funny to think of a time when no one knew which of those would soon enough own the new century and rent out space to everyone else. As often happens, the band themselves found all the attention disturbing, and reacted with a non-rock album, which began with the neurotic and fascinatingly minimalist "Everything in Its Right Place." *Kid A* was almost certainly the most musically peculiar number one record, making for an interesting question as to what everyone was responding to; it really didn't inaugurate a new trend of albums that sounded like that, for instance. In a way, the effect was felt most in TV commercials. It was fairly suddenly far more okay to have indie, art-project sonics in your multimillion-dollar TV ad, sort of in the same way it started being okay in 1960s short subjects to have little cartoon people bopping around to music that sounded like Ornette Coleman.

"New History" Verbow
Besides non-rock moves, 2000 saw a dangerous escalation of the who's-louder digital mastering sweepstakes that permeated even cello-driven, not-at-all-full-throttle releases like this addictive recipient of the Brad Wood cum Chris Lord-Alge star treatment.

"Dark Center of the Universe" Modest Mouse
The most engaged I've been by the phenomenally successful alt band Modest Mouse was on *The Moon & Antarctica,* another case of a band going experimental, they say. "I'm not the dark center of the universe, like you thought" is a snappy line, and the part with the guitar work with the little wavers creates an atmosphere ably.

"I Hate My Frickin' I.S.P." Todd Rundgren
This is a stand-out cut from Todd's latter-day online universe, done in the old Todd mold—both in that it's a no-pussyfooting rock track (not, oh, a cappella soul?), and in that it succeeds at charmingly unexpected human commiseration in the manner of *Something/Anything.* And it's a song about being online! Our protagonist is stuck with horrible Internet service in a Motel 6 with a "deadline that won't back off" and "no time left to…" well, you'll just have to buy the song.

"Nietzsche" The Dandy Warhols
This Gil Norton–produced beast is, I think, the very biggest of the 2000 big mixes, at least psychologically, what with the droll pagan implacability of "I want a god who stays dead." Apparently the film featuring the DWs' experience touring with the Brian Jonestown

Massacre is a hoot.

"Now I Can Die" Nina Gordon
I love the sheer sound of this one. Metallica producer Bob Rock handled this post–Veruca Salt project pretty deftly, sounding right at home in Jon Brion territory—no quarters taped to kick drum beaters here. It's one of those See's candies with a weird fruit thing going on: if "He likes to try on all my clothes, but not my underwear" isn't challenging in your book, how about a straight rhyming of "love" with "turtle dove"?

"How Am I Different" Aimee Mann
The aforementioned Mr. Brion is at his best here. *Bachelor No. 2* is the sweet spot of the world doing as Aimee Mann does at least as much as the other way around. Not only was there the famous kiss-off of the music industry, constituting perhaps the most iconic event in the shift to artist-controlled online music sales, but she established a mid-tempo, less-rocking-out standard governing the emotional moments of a certain class of later mature audience artists like Sufjan Stevens in a way that superseded Cobainesque howling.

"Near You" Teenage Fanclub
Not their best production, but here's yet another case of a Teenage Fanclub song that initially struck me as a bland, information-free pop exercise, then within a few listens revealed a gleaming crystal of a musical structure.

"My World View" Alison Faith Levy
Besides playing keyboards in my band, Alison released this stunning song in 2000. I saw her band do it live at SF's Make Out Room and I gave her a standing ovation for it, which I truly felt.

"Hello Operator" The White Stripes
"You're pretty good looking, for a girl" were the first words from the White Stripes that grabbed me, but "Hello Operator" presents the whole crazily emphatic package. That this doesn't come off as antiquarian is mysterious; if Mr. White ever had a conversation with an operator, it wasn't to get a dime back. Also, for being as Daliesque as at moments it is—"my coffin doesn't have a phone"—it has some real character-actor integrity. I love the way he says, "How you gonna get the money?"

"Ms. Jackson" Outkast
"Ms. Jackson" is quite a creation. The chorus, with that little cascading piano, is as memorable as they come, and the rapid-fire rap to madame la baby mama's mama is, well, really something. At times it's definitely good; I buy the whole first verse part with, "She never

got a chance to hear my side of the story." On the other hand, the third verse with "Cheating, beating, and to the G's they be the same thing" has me seriously confused as to what's going on, and I think I feel good about keeping it that way.

"The Model" Belle and Sebastian
This is around where Belle and Sebastian started hitting their stride—for good, we can hope—trading generally in the musical and literary touches carelessly abandoned by a modernist vanguard, like the harpsichord here. Lyrically, Stuart Murdoch is a subtler Morrissey with a greater likelihood of warming up to his subjects. "You're not impressed by me/But it's a funny way for you to tell me/A whisper in a choir stall": that's good; it's maudlin, but with the specialness of not quite being dismissive. With Morrissey, the gap between unimpressor and unimpressee is unbridgeable.

"Live in Japan" Mike Keneally and Beer for Dolphins
Anyone who wonders whatever happened to prog rock need look no farther than Mike Keneally. He was the last touring guitarist hired by Frank Zappa to play the hard stuff—so you know his papers are in order. What's not obvious until you're exposed to a fair amount of his material is the incredible melodic range and facility that go with the frenetic guitar and xylophone duets and nutty humor. This most pop and pro of his emphasis tracks talks about wanting to live (the verb) in Japan and "revel in our otherness" in a way that reminds me of the best pre-fame Tubes (Prairie Prince—man!).

"Beautiful Day" U2
U2 have steadily gained credibility with me—any humanitarian of Bono's caliber is likely to win me over in the end. *Zooropa*'s "A vampire or a victim/It depends on who's around" was a brilliant line, but maybe the music wasn't quite keeping pace. "Beautiful Day" is their biggest all-around success. It's got just enough subtlety of texture and—my God—chord changes to spice things up, while still basically leveraging the thing they do. Still, I've never been actually *thrilled* by U2 until the moment at the end of "Beautiful Day" where he goes into "What you don't have, you don't need it now." That feels like it comes from nowhere, as an improv, if not a vision.

"High Time" Michael Penn
If all you've heard is "No Myth" ("What if I was Romeo in black jeans"), do yourself the favor of further exploration of the wide talents of Sean's brother and Aimee Mann's husband. He's a world-class producer, too, and here you get a shining example of everything he does—the extra-bold shoop-be-bops, the big, fat, punch of every sound, the nimble writing: "What a scene/What a drama just to find the door/That was mean/That was totally uncalled for." Who can spot Aimee's cameo?

“Loved One’s Lies” Jupiter Affect
If you loved the Three O’Clock in 1985 and have drifted, this is the place for a return visit. It’s delirious, over-the-top feyness over 1969–1974 muscle rock not completely dissimilar to Sparks or Queen, but if I had to play just one track to sell you on that description of the three groups, it would probably be this track by a nose. In fact, production cred for the biggest growling guitar of the year and bludgeoning rhythm section is due erstwhile Spark Earle Mankey.

“Mass Romantic” The New Pornographers
The 2000s have been good; probably a little better than the ’90s and not quite as good as the ’70s. From my personal perspective, *the* news item of 2000 was the New Pornographers. With the star trio of Neko Case, Carl Newman (Zumpano!), and Dan Bejar (of Dan Bejar/Destroyer drinking game fame!), this was the most fruitful collective since Elephant Six. A lot of the songs are *really* good; the title song is the most remarkable, for the way it builds a swing groove on a mildly unlikely ka-chunka guitar figure and nasal organ, and especially for the run-on sentence verse structure that always resolves in the middle on the word “radio.” Wow. But did they ever find out who did the cover painting?

2001

"Now Mary" The White Stripes
This rocks like mad, and then there's that ridiculous tempo speed up that they stay in lock step for all the way out of it, and that *really* rocks like mad. Hardly anything could have been a better influence on '00s music than the White Stripes, with their disdain for any high-tech convenience. Maybe most importantly, after thirty years, there is finally a big-time American youth market act with a better mastery of blues than the best British practitioners. *White Blood Cells* remains the big one for me so far (starting with the spot-on hilarious attackers/photographers graphic), pointing easily to an intervening era of would-be adepts' heads being too full of the wrong stuff to ever write a song about how you should behave respectfully toward your mother.

"How It Goes" For Stars
This is as tuneful and shimmering as anything in a large top tier of nebulous-overwhelmed-feeling music, getting the prize for some extremely respectable vibraphone (or I may mean xylophone) playing that steps up about halfway through the song. "Don't be so profound": a good line, and, often enough, good advice to and from indie folk tasked with making listenable music.

"Early Riser" The Bevis Frond
Nick Saloman's reputation for deeply underground prog, garage, psych type jams is corroborated a lot more at a *Terrastock* performance than on any studio recording I'm familiar with; this economical, nuanced song could have been one of the better ones on some Teenage Fanclub record.

"Chainsmoking in the U.S.A." The Posies
A surprisingly sturdy track from what I considered a one-off, we're-not-really-back-together e.p. "It's getting way too easy/It's getting way too easy for me and you to get what we want": I'm not certain how Jon Auer would have me apply that, but I like it; if it nudges me away from self-satisfaction, okay.

"I'm Waking Up to Us" Belle and Sebastian
Since the strangely awful *Boy with the Arab Strap,* they have kept shaping up as one of—I'll say—the top five artists of the decade. Keep letting them talk (as good heavens they do on this one) and they will keep saying interesting enough things; keep giving them arrangement budgets, they'll keep coming back with ever-worthier results.

"Romeo" Basement Jaxx
Catchy for the ages. How sick has my family gotten of me walking

around singing, “You used to be my Romeo”? Besides a fantastic sense of the rhythm of lines, there’s an interesting—I want to say Oscar Wilde–like—conversational tone: “You see, my dear, I have had enough/Of keeping quiet about all this stuff.”

“Jaded” Aerosmith

I used to be fond of mentioning Mike Shipley as an example of a big name producer I didn’t like that much. Until I heard this. The ’00s have had a problem with productions going too big for the real world. A lot of hip-hop tracks sound awful on an iPod, I guess because the huge bass distorts all over going to m4p, and a lot of guitar pop is red-lined for fear of sounding puny in any shuffle context, but you want to turn it down, and when you do, it’s grainy and dimensionless. “Jaded” is as intimidatingly huge as anything, and also just plain sounds like a million bucks. I don’t know how he does it; simply a very good bag of tricks, I’ll guess, and ears that I suspect have *grown* top-notch.

“Mississippi” Bob Dylan

A lot of coats of unreality have been sanded and stripped off when we meet the Bob Dylan of *Love and Theft* and “Mississippi.” No struggle, game, or “power of expression” is ever going to be so decisively resolved as to end struggling, but details of human relationships once small in the scheme of means-to-ends are now in sharp focus: “My ship’s been split to splinters and it’s sinking fast/…But my heart is not weary, it’s light and it’s free/I’ve got nothin’ but affection for all those who’ve sailed with me.”

“Still Fighting It” Ben Folds

This power-ballad-redux threatens a cliché smartaleckiness with “You want a Coke? Maybe some fries?” but ends up better than all that in a sympathetically wistful and amusing comparison of notes with the next generation. “You’re so much like me/I’m sorry.”

“California” Rufus Wainwright

I get a “this is all so easy for me” vibe from Rufus Wainwright that makes me approach him as not quite one of us, and this oddly evidence-free dis of California (a state grown smug in its diversity and car ownership?) is a risk not to help, but I’m solidly won over. The delivery of “You’re such a wonder that I think I’ll stay in bed” lifts it perfectly from petulant to funny, and I have no idea why “my new grandma Bea Arthur” is funny, but it unquestionably somehow is.

“Captain Easychord” Stereolab

This is my favorite result from Stereolab, who are first-rate as a static principle but often system-alarm low in density of information per minute of music. This lurchy but captivating piano groove is one of the more subtle, novel, and evocative sheer pieces of music here. There’s an unrelated second half of the song which is just fine, but not involved in what grabbed me.

“Working Girls” Pernice Brothers
Everyone likes this song. It’s a well-above-average poetic take on job market dissatisfaction, less because of the frankly dreary suicide references than idiosyncratic turns of phrase like “She summered every winter” and “I feel sullen/I feel sullen.” Interesting vocal recording approach, that of Joe Pernice: compress the breathy frequencies to unity; but it works.

“Mine and Yours” David Mead
Bill Forsyth at Minus Zero Records handed me this among things to buy on my 2001 visit, and I get a lot of converts. Nothing too quotable lyricwise save the very nice “I’m a mess to be made this evening,” it’s a tightly wound precision watchspring of harmonies and cadences, staged within familiar conventions but with an exceptionally keen ear for musical payoff.

“One Morning” Ken Stringfellow
This slightly Mersey-beat festival of vocal sevenths is one of the more ambitious pieces of songwriting to be consigned to an acoustic guitar arrangement. This first of the mature Ken solo albums (the one with the Edward Scissorhands–like picture) inaugurates the peculiar set of expectations one would never have guessed from the Posies, such as more than one full-on soul number.

“The Middle” Jimmy Eat World
There’s a Chinese puzzle quality to how the I Don’t Know But I’ve Been Told simplicity of the chorus and the repeated “everything everything”s and “all right all right”s work out to something more joyous than the sum of the parts. The singing conveys a positive attitude more relentless than the world has yet seen; there is simply no stopping it. This young girl *will* take the time to work it all out, she will *not* care about people who won’t let her be herself, and everything *will* be all right, any questions, thank you, I thought not.

“For the Stars” Elvis Costello and Anne Sofie von Otter
For all the pedigree and firepower of this project, there’s a winsome gawkiness to it. Anne Sofie von Otter’s vocals are head-voicey, she doesn’t sound emotionally engaged, and she’s (gasp) not autotuned for a modern release—all of which are virtual quality control givens. And of course Elvis Costello comes in, and is so Elvis Costello that your brain can focus on nothing else for many seconds, kind of like trying to watch Hamlet played by Yogi Bear. Of course, it’s an out of control winner. The verse is classic, the chorus on “For the stars were so much/They were so much brighter then” magnificent and transporting. Would anyone but E.C. follow that with a line as ungainly as “If I couldn’t put a price on your head”? But you just smile. That is the question, Mr. Ranger, sir.

“Imitation of Life” R.E.M.
Pete Buck wasn’t sure about this one: okay, it was a *mere* nice song, but music can be so much more. Seeing as this is the best R.E.M. song in a decade’s diameter, I think the lesson for us all is: if you write one of the best songs of the year, just take the bullet. The chorus of “That’s cinnamon, that’s Hollywood, come on, come on” makes an indelible impression, and the way I’ve seen Stipe do it live is great: he sings some lower part that isn’t quite as good the first few times, as if to say sorry, my voice just won’t do the part that was on the record, then nails the regular high part the last few times. Kind of like James Brown throwing off the cape and running back to the mike.

“Girl Inform Me” The Shins
Nina Gordon from Veruca Salt told me I had to get this; they’re needless to say relatively big now. The Shins are good at getting at frames of mind that have a fragility to them, of the kind that might inspire the inspired line, “This is no umbrella to take into the wind.”

“Timorous Me” Ted Leo and the Pharmacists
Soon after it came out, someone (I want to say it was Doug Mayo-Wells) sent me this among some D.C. artists. I flipped. The vocal is a powerhouse of right-there energy (in what, one-bit resolution?), going through some vignettes recalling long-past acquaintances. The emotional vividness of the descriptions is startling. For a friend of such early childhood he “only [knows him] from photographs”: “I only wonder what it is I even miss him for.” For a female fan he wasn’t quite bold enough to hit on: “But I watched her sing along with every word/In the prettiest voice that I never heard.” I’m not always satisfied with Ted Leo’s sense of musical climax, but when he gets it right it can be blazing (like at “the color of the sea from way up there” in the also great “Stove by a Whale”). I’ll illustrate. I’m reviewing the 2001 CD with my wife Kristine today in the car; we’re discussing stuff like volume disparity affecting playing order. We get to the number one song. She’s got her hand on the volume, asking, “Do the drums come in?” “Really late.” Verse one over, no drums. “They’re a tease,” she says. Verse two comes and goes. “A girl doesn’t like to be teased *too* much.” The break has some toms and tambourine. She looks at me like, was that it? Third verse. “Now me and Jodi spend a lot of our time…” Now I’ve got the left hand raised up like I’m holding a flag. Second line, “Just sitting in silence,” I bring the hand down smack on two and four with the snare, and *finally* the whole kit comes in. I’m dorking out now: “Genius!”

2002

"We Are All Made of Stars" Moby
The significant thing for me about 2002, besides being the year my first daughter was born, was that 9/11 had just happened. Either this was a year that artists became inclined toward more serious existential declarations in their lyrics, or I was now listening more attentively for that—which of those is really the case, I couldn't say. And speaking of my perceptions that may not be the case, I think of Moby and Eminem as being the last two significant groundswell American artists, and they had pretty different personalities and demographics: Moby was a humble, idealistic humanist, and Eminem was an egotistical, pragmatic populist. I wasn't overly interested in either techno or rap, their areas of expertise, but I'm guessing they have a lot to tell me about how audiences 20 years younger than I am think. I'm still waiting for the inspiration to quote Eminem, so let's go to Moby. "You can't ignore what is going 'round/Slowly rebuilding/I feel it in me/ Growing in numbers/Growing in peace/People they come together/ People they fall apart/No one can stop us now/'Cause we are all made of stars." That's a pretty song—pretty guitar, and pretty words—but besides being pretty, my 2002 mind also tries to hammer them into a serious worldview thus: there's a growing community to whom peace comes spontaneously. That would be nice; but it's interesting that "we" aren't everyone, there's "we" and then some other people trying to "stop" us. Eminem? Are "we" the people who come together and fall apart? If so, that sounds a tiny bit underachieving—*anyone* can stop people who fall apart.

"Exit the Inferno" Transcender
I was a passing acquaintance of Tom Morgan, and to be honest, I always carried around the impression that he had a way to go to get his musical presentation in order. One day he sent me the Transcender CD, and I was suddenly amazed at his proficiency, and then a few months later, he died. I'm glad he left us this way of getting to know him better. An odd combination of sublime and goofy expressions (another song is literally about how good Guided By Voices are), there's also in retrospect an premonition of life on earth being tenuous, e.g., an out-of-left-field line like "There are so many people over eighty in Fort Lauderdale."

"Infra Riot" The Soundtrack of Our Lives
I still haven't heard the apparently respectable Union Carbide Productions, but *Behind the Music* is one musically together album. "Still Aging" is another very fine cut. So, per my theme, is there a serious lyrical message here? "It's time to take control again and be the only one/It's time to play your role again and be the holy one/'Cause I don't think that anyone knows.… So welcome to the other side/Don't be afraid to crucify/It's not too late to free your mind." Don't be afraid to crucify? Is that like, "Overcome your

reluctance to carry out public lynching?" I suspect what we could have here is not a vote for lynching so much as a version of the great middlebrow sentiment that freeing yourself from the likes of "organized religion" requires bold thinking. But that is simply the herd mentality of our time. Nietzsche, the great self-styled resister of herd mentality, was no middlebrow, and he would have liked that line, provided you were okay with it actually meaning "Overcome your reluctance to carry out public lynching."

"Mad World" Michael Andrews & Gary Jules

I strongly suspect that if I'd been twenty years younger, I'd have thought *Donnie Darko* was the best movie ever, or maybe tied with *Rushmore.* This must be just about the most a cover version has ever improved on the original.

"Don't Know Why" Norah Jones

Jesse Harris's original bears almost the opposite relationship to this one as Tears for Fears' original bore to the last song: Norah succeeds by upping the ante of professionalism, whereas it was professionalism that destroyed the original "Mad World." Jesse's original version is personable, in a Paul Simon way, but Norah's zooming around the notes during the "heart is drenched in wine" chorus really call into being hooks that weren't there before, almost by magic.

"Heavy Metal Drummer" Wilco

The foregoing outright collaboration with *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*'s producer Jim O'Rourke, called Loose Fur, was also good, and an interesting exercise in how to stay interesting if you want to stretch a groove out a bit—mostly: make sure what you're repeating is sonically interesting enough to begin with. *Summerteeth* had a little bit of an Oliver Stone problem: it was the dark, edgy record that was a bit too aware that it was dark and edgy, and *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* corrects that. The sound and themes of "Heavy Metal Drummer" are littler, more organic, more intimate—it's the best example of what the album does right, although many songs do ("War on War" was probably my second favorite). The myth created by a major label dropping the album got overblown, and caused some flaws to get glossed over in the rush of enthusiasm, but it's a bright spot of the year no matter how you slice things.

"Any Road" George Harrison

George Harrison didn't need 9/11 to get serious. *Brainwashed* is the result of many years working through deep religious commitment (to Hare Krishna Hinduism as I can gather such things), an intruder's serious attempt on his life, and a battle with cancer that ended in 2001 before the album was finished. I consider "Any Road" a major song. It's a beautiful ukulele and slide guitar rock production and I like the intimate, almost fatherly way the lyrics discuss the need for alertness to ultimate concerns—a Bhagavad Gita for peacetime. To me, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you

there" means: unless you bother to find out what the point of life is, life will oblige you with pointlessness. I'll get back to you after my research team confirms that.

"Little Wonder" Augie March
Though lower-key, Australians Augie March impress me as the leading edge of musical dramatic-irony work as practiced by the Decemberists or DeVotchKa. Here is some remarkable sensitivity to unseen plight: "You might be amazed/To find the secrets of the city in its alleyways/ In the bins behind the swill cafes/Amid the clean-picked chicken bones and cartilage a spirit groans/A small heart beats and a red beak groans/'O pity, where's my little body gone?'" The surprise section of this song that goes into the muted-trumpet jazz blues line, with the room reverb, is a great ear-opening production touch.

"A Better Future" David Bowie
The graphics of *Heathen* are great: crossed-out texts, defaced Christian renaissance paintings, Bowie at a desk crossing out pages of writing, bound volumes by great Enlightenment thinkers: Einstein, Freud, Nietzsche. And I didn't mention Nietzsche earlier to tie in with Bowie's graphics, Bowie put Nietzsche in his graphic because he has a far above-average understanding of the important events in the human story, and could well anticipate it being something someone like me might one day want to talk about. Whether or not I have an above average understanding of Bowie is less certain, but "A Better Future" strikes me as another middlebrow sentiment, where you threaten God with withholding devotion if he doesn't do you favors. However, Bowie is like Joyce; when he expresses a middlebrow sentiment, there are levels of irony you and I might not be immediately up to the challenge of interpreting—like simultaneously making fun of the sentiment and expressing sympathy for how people came to feel that way. For serious worldviews, Bowie is your man in the pop music field, at least when Bob Dylan isn't throwing himself at the task.

"Real Bad News" Aimee Mann
Another album with great pictures—illustrations by graphic artist Seth —is Aimee Mann's *Lost in Space.* My favorite song on it is "Real Bad News," a song about facing inconvenient facts. "You don't know, so don't say you do/You don't" is typical of Aimee's gift for conversational communication in lyrics. "You paint a lovely picture, but reality intrudes/With a message for you/And it's real bad news." At its best, 2002 could be about waking up to the self-serving stories we tell ourselves.

"PDA" Interpol
This is a catchy song, what with "We have 200 couches…," but like Augie March, Interpol involve some heavy poetry—and I don't always follow it, yet there's evidence enough that someone is at home. I'm almost certain this was written before 9/11, but with a little imagination the sentiment can be applied to cultural or interpersonal

animosities: “But you will not consider sadly/How you helped me to stray/You will not reach me, I am resenting a position/That is past resentment and now I can consider/And now there is this distance.” I am assuming this is “public display of affection,” not “personal digital assistant”; that would be an interesting case of deliberate ambiguity.

“Up the Bracket” The Libertines
Harkening back to London punk/ska, “Up the Bracket” is a fascinating vignette; I can’t pick it all out, but someone essentially says a disreputable pair was trying to get to “you,” and “I” got rid of them for you at some personal risk, and the conclusion is, “But it’s just like he’s/she’s in another world/Doesn’t see the danger on show.” At its best, 2002 could be about becoming aware of the danger other people are in.

“La Cherite” The Soft Boys
Nextdoorland, the Soft Boys reunion album, came and went without much of a splash considering how successful the tour was and how good the album was. Over a dreamy guitar jangle, the singer recites, “Looking for la Cherite/La Shea won’t do/Must have la Cherite.” I don’t know what the spelling or the reference is, but it projects a fussiness that plays against the lyrics’ several brilliant one-liners, which in best 2002 manner, are self-indicting: “I enjoyed you/But I couldn’t see/That you were a person, a person like me”; “Only a dream can love you this way.”

“Jonathon Fisk” Spoon
Kill the Moonlight was one of the high-profile artistic breakthrough albums. A band of mine shared a bill with Spoon in Memphis in 1998—there were about twenty people in the audience—and they were very good, but nothing like the perfect economy they hit on here. The very simple elements have an amazing way of making every variation count; “Jonathon Fisk” sounds like a school bully, and the singer musters some perspective and hope as well as condemnation: “I want to turn him around,” and my favorite, “Says it’s a sin, but to him religion don’t mean a thing/It’s just another way to be right wing.”

“Folk Singer” Brendan Benson
It was obvious Brendan Benson should be a force from his commercially unsuccessful 1996 debut, but *Lapalco,* a much more consistent whole, confirmed it emphatically. “Folk Singer” is perfect pop rock, modulating its moods with good humor and effortless musicality. Brendan, too, has macho situations on his mind: “I’m not the kind of man who acts very strong when the girls are looking on.” I love the way his girlfriend tries to get him out of bed with “You’re not John Lennon.”

“Tear Off Your Own Head (It’s a Doll Revolution)” Elvis Costello
This is the best E.C. pop song since *This Year’s Model*—it’s just great.

Interestingly, the reunited Bangles did a very good cover of it a year later. The zooming bass part from non-Attraction Davey Faragher is an unexpected thrill. Whatever he's doing on the little half-measure before the word "revolution" hurts so good.

"Something to Talk About" Badly Drawn Boy

This is a wonderful song that I think was probably written for the Hugh Grant movie *About a Boy* specifically. At any rate, I take it as a set of lyrics that leverage the movie rather than trying to do all the lifting themselves; the melodic crescendos at "You've got to let me in or let me out," etc., feel very well set up. This one gets stuck in my head like nobody's business.

"Arlington Hill (The Baby You Need Jesus Baptist Church Youth Choir Invites You Thus)" Stew

Besides being the most gorgeous melody of the year and possibly the decade, the genius here is representing the ambient presence of religion, specifically Christianity, in a social reality that doesn't think about it. Here the action is "going to choir rehearsal stoned." The piece is part of the three-song "Drug Suite" which is peppered by Eliot-worthy observations of the loss of transcendence in modernity: "Outside on the patio/The libations flow like song/But the explanation's wrong." There's a hectic dead weight to the partygoers casting around for significance that never quite materializes: "I hung on tight and drank every word/And everything mattered/It's so different now/The ashes were scattered/We moved on somehow." By contrast, the straight luminosity of "suddenly there is a meaning" that in the song is ostensibly associated with the pot is startling. But for some reason, in the community of the kids in the car going to choir practice the meaning stuck, and in more disconnected social environments it didn't. 2002—plenty of lessons in meaning.

2003

"Milkshake" Kelis
It was around 1983 that I felt ushered into the music business a bit, and around 2003 that I felt fairly completely ushered out. As closing credit themes go, what says "you don't belong here anymore" like an Asiatic synth-funk sex-ritual song called "Milkshake"? Warm it up! That chorus, "My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard and they're like/Is better than yours" has an eerily infectious cadence. One hears that Kelis and writers/producers the Neptunes are going to have to charge for teaching the techniques that freaks these boys, and one withdraws knowing the torch has been passed to worthy hands.

"Black Math" The White Stripes
You'd think that being a big Stripes fan going in, for them to create *the* new song that all kids play at guitar stores and yet have it be the case that "Seven Nation Army" leaves me cold would be unthinkable, yet it does. However, the celebration of teenage guitar ecstasy that is "Black Math" makes me want to go jiggle the pickup switch of a Les Paul right now.

"Way of Life" Stew
Stew is well capable of musical and lyrical tours de force, so in a soft, musically underachieving, lyrically conversational setting, his feelings come across by slower diffusion. The office hookup and related snapshots of spiritual isolation play a little like *Dubliners,* just letting the characters hang themselves for our entertainment, except when, literally, "the choir sings love, love, love is a way of life."

"Take It Like a Man" Joe Jackson
Mr. Jackson apparently still makes a pop record here and there, and this is a fine showing, gearing up for the scalding appearance on the Ben Folds/William Shatner "Common People" in 2004. Ben Folds seems to have fed some of Joe's own fancy rock piano energy back to him.

"El Caminos in the West" Grandaddy
Grandaddy probably deserve immortality just for "Alan Parsons in a Winter Wonderland," the genius of which is that it seems to exist just so they can say, "In the meadow we can build a snowman/And pretend that he is Alan Parsons"; "El Caminos in the West" is my favorite for more conventional reasons.

"Carmichael" [edit] Neil Young and Crazy Horse
"Powderfinger" and "Down by the River" have proven that Neil is the rock guy born to create fully drawn characters, and the *Greendale*

project finally lets him put together a whole verse narrative. My favorite part is "Carmichael," about the thoughts of those close to the slain officer at the time of his memorial. It's full of fairly loving observations of human nature and mixed emotions, culminating in the widow's ejaculation of "That was a good vacation/Maybe the best of all/God damn it Carmichael, you're dead now/And I'm talking to the wall." It's a long piece; I edited two or three minutes of somewhat meandering guitar soloing, which left plenty.

"Fall Dog Bombs the Moon" David Bowie

Reality is certainly the album of 2003. I can't even say it's unusually good, or even that I *like* it very much, but it has a power of engagement that is remarkable. The center of the album for me is "Fall Dog Bombs the Moon," and the center of the song is the line, "There's always a moron, someone to hate." Together with "These blackest of years that have no sound/No shape, no depth, no underground," it suggests a challenge to the reality of Western modernity that has real teeth. The lazy side of me is relieved to hear the just-rightness of Earl Slick replace the too-muchness of Reeves Gabrels, but the less lazy side of me refuses to disown *Hours…* for reasons implicit in the *Reality* worldview.

"Piazza, New York Catcher" Belle and Sebastian

The way this keeps three balls in the air—simple British Isle folk, breezy *New Yorker*
poetry, and accurate San Francisco local color—is astonishing. Lyrically I infer an exploration of what it means to require one's relationship commitment to be within a bohemian framework.

"Andy, Please" Van Duren

Recorded in 1978 and unreleased until 2003, *Idiot Optimism* is part two of Van Duren's brief but bright two-year recording career. "Andy, Please" exists in demo form, I believe with minor deity Jody Stephens in semi-permanent drummer capacity just after Big Star. Vocally callow and in some ways with more power pop sense (the line "I'm aware of the love you're going through" has something Chilton-worthy about it), the demo is worth seeking out; this album version has some boring studio pro guitar and a gravellier vocal that in the end is just so good you have to call it the definitive version.

"Hey Ya!" Outkast

This is possibly the most beloved song of the decade, and I don't do anywhere near that much beloving of it, but hey, it's a really outstanding verse melody. And "you've got to shake it like a Polaroid picture" appeals to the Luddite in me.

"99 Problems" Jay-Z

I don't usually find much to like in rap lyrics that aim for the thug life hero thing, but as I know many of my European-American homies

agree, “99 Problems” is pretty darned entertaining. That beat with the fuzz guitar chord is killer, for one thing. I love “Yappin’ to the captain” (did he make that up?) and “Are you carrying a weapon? I know a lot of you are.” Yet, I’m not sure what sort of social engineering is supposed to be accomplished by a lyric that talks about “how I hold my gun” while inventing a false prejudice of firearm possession.

“Turn a Square” The Shins
For some reason it was hard for me to identify this as the standout track from *Chutes Too Narrow;* it struck me as a sort of throwaway novelty boogie number. But living with the album, I came to observe myself being happiest when I was listening to that song. For one thing, that’s an *excellent* boogie riff, no cheap signifier, and that crazy repeated-descent guitar solo couldn’t be more perfect. The memorable line is the one about the glimpse of ankle that makes him “react like it’s 1805”; James Mercer has that T.S. Eliot feeling that things used to be different and somehow more meaningful in times past, and he also seems to have the wherewithal to grow that into spiritual longing rather than just surface antiquarianism.

“The Laws Have Changed” The New Pornographers
The melodies on *Electric Version* can be a little bit incoherent, but not on this stunner of a pop theocratic meditation. Neko and Carl take turns reacting to “Pharaoh on the microphone” with awe at the great unknown and iconoclasm. These Canadians’ inventiveness with beats, keys, and na na nas keep giving power pop a good name.

“You Were Right” Badly Drawn Boy
I woke up one day and somewhat resignedly realized I had no choice but to like Badly Drawn Boy. I can’t quite say wherein my resistance lies, but this song was the swing vote. Something about the pacing of the verses—the halting triplet followed by the long run-on sentences—is perfect for the unrushed recapitulation of what it took for Mr. Boy to reach a state of contrition, including his dream of being married to the queen while Madonna pined from afar, which showed him it was “right to bide your time and not to buy into my misery.”

“Red Morning Light” Kings of Leon
Apparently the sons of a revival circuit preacher according to the press kit, the Kings are a very good southern garagey rock band that have achieved jaw-dropping worldwide success. My favorite of their songs, “Red Morning Light,” offers some helpful advice to the young ladies: “I said hey hey/You’re giving all your cinnamon away/That ain’t right!”

“Light in Your Eyes” Sheryl Crow
I’m not ordinarily a fan of Sheryl Crow, and odds are that any given piece of Christian rock will weird me out, but I find “Light in Your

Eyes"—which I take to be straight devotional—utterly lovely and transporting. The soul of "My Sweet Lord" is not far here (there's a direct quote in the slide solo if I recall correctly). The boldest line is "You never existed until you saw the light"; the sentiment reminds of Simone Weil's brilliant *Gravity and Grace,* which asserts that human action is mechanical, gravitational, but for the enlightening breaking-in of grace.

"A Song for Someone Sometimes" Outrageous Cherry
Outrageous Cherry have been out there threatening formidable stuff at all times for quite a while, and this is the one that for me really nailed it. This strange (always) pondering of universality unfolds in tight harmonies over chords that wander adventurously but make it back by dark with something special and oddly personable in its impersonalness.

"One Good Cry" Dipsomaniacs
This is the Norway Dipsomaniacs, not the New Jersey Dipsomaniacs, whom Anton Barbeau has told me nothing about. Not so with the Norwegians, who along with these other of my last three selections, have a plausible hook-of-the-year claim—here with "All you really need is one good cry." And how about those drums?

"Stealing Rosemary" The Bangles
This is just as good as anything from the heyday, which for me is really saying something. Why it didn't rocket to becoming a far bigger hit than "Eternal Flame" can only be attributable to global warming.

"12:51" The Strokes
Not a *great* big Strokes fan, I heard—and fell in love with—"12:51" out of context of the rest of the album, or even the first album, though it seems more expansive than the primitivist Velvets aspect of the early material. "12:51" in a way feels like it wants to be Squeeze or Belle and Sebastian, but really stays pretty close to a simple boy-calls-girl scenario, albeit with a slight art-rock edge: "Talk to me now, I'm older.…Change your plans and then phone me" (which I was happier to think was "Change your friends and then phone me" but looking at online lyrics, I seem to have misheard). Just when I think I can't take one more of those fuzz vocal productions, someone comes along and makes fine use of it, so it's probably a technique with legs, and the Strokes were early adopters. The bottom line is that there's just something supernaturally perfect about the verse hook melody.

2004

"The Party's Over" Paranoids
What's fun about 2004 is how, for every song, people are going to go, "He picked this over Arcade Fire?" Here's the way that kind of a bake-off would go: when Arcade Fire sing, "Every time you close your eyes" a bunch of times, I pretty much just don't know why they're doing that. On the other hand, when the Paranoids sing, "The party's over" a bunch of times, it's because *the party is over* for the guy in the song, who's losing his date to the D.J. or worse. However, the party that is the song is in full swing—all timeless up-tempo rock deployed at the classic level of small combo economy one could expect from the likes of the Kinks, Attractions, or dB's—take that "all right, all right" moment. Thanks to Bradley Skaught for hooking me up.

"Lady" Lenny Kravitz
Here's a big, unusual groove built around what may be the most underproduced guitar in any expensive recording. The chord progression goes off at some satisfyingly funny angles, and lyrically, well, when Lenny has this sophisticated lady, what do you think he wants to tell her regarding whether or not he needs all his other ladies? That's right, he *doesn't need them.*

"Girls of Wild Strawberries" Guided By Voices
Guided By Voices are in the business of getting to unusual frames of mind by methods that laugh in the face of risk management. The latest in a series of audience-halving album titles: *Half Smiles of the Decomposed.* "Girls of Wild Strawberries" targets the insatiable market for Ingmar Bergman references with something like the beat from (in my realm of experience) "Hey Little Child" played for jangling grandeur—it's hard not to think of being outdoors. As is a theme with Robert Pollard, there's a new feminine-borne, possibly Bergmanesque reality just over the horizon: "reminded who we are by the girls of wild strawberries."

"Summer Sunshine" The Corrs
I have two young daughters, and this is music I feel good about them liking—I first heard it used for a teen girls' dance number at an event I attended for my wife Kristine's solo ballet performance. The production conjures dependable emotional magic with the kind of technical competency I associate with, say, Studio Ghibli. The lines "In Coffee City we borrowed heaven/Don't take it back, I've never felt so wanted" illustrate an ability to speak directly without editing the fact of vulnerability occurring in a mundane locale—at a moment where the lead melody does an especially nice turn.

"I Thought You Were My Boyfriend" The Magnetic Fields

Pound for pound, their album *i* is even better than *69 Love Songs*—although what a lot of pounds those were. This one doesn't showcase the acoustic sonics that are really the star of the album, but it's pretty close to being the best disco song ever. I can't decide if the words actually have extra zing because of their gayness or if that just retains a shred of shock value for me.

"Promising Actress" John Vanderslice
Cellar Door: another strong whole album. A good case for what the last time I checked was Vanderslice's militantly analog stance—bells, big toms, cool horns. What lyrics! They seem to be recapitulating what the characters in the David Lynch movie *Mulholland Drive* ought to be taking from the experience. Extremely imaginative stuff.

"Every Moment" Rogue Wave
They seemed to become a relatively high-profile group all of a sudden, and it's nice to hear the right pure musical elements to justify that when it happens. They add a certain prog spin to a thoughtful but relaxed Elephant-6-like style. "Endgame" is another quite memorable cut.

"Mr. Brightside" The Killers
My friend Bob Lloyd's daughter Emma sold me on this one. It's one of those 2000s tracks where the tyranny of mastering volume threatens to smash everything into a roiling dynamic non-range—yet in this case everything holds together for me, and it all just sounds winningly big. This is one of my favorite songs that causes the quaint designation "emo" to come to mind; I may be too old to appreciate "touching his chest" rhyming with "sick," but hundred-to-one compression is for kids from six to sixty.

"If You Know Time" Robyn Hitchcock
I get the impression Robyn Hitchcock is so good at being whimsical that when he engages people seriously, there is an odd tendency for it not to register consciously. No one sings about death more resonantly than Robyn Hitchcock. This one works a clever if perhaps obvious motif: "There's a door inside you/And it wants to slam you shut," etc., but then throws in the seemingly unrelated part about "In the war that's coming/Setting good guys against good/It's always a good cause." It synthesizes a sigh for ultimate concerns, and you're not quite sure what hit you.

"Fate, Say It Again" Doug Gillard
Gillard was an important member of Guided By Voices (he wrote "I Am a Tree"!), and this coolly delivered song uses some of the same vocabulary—e.g., tricky 1-2-1-2 intervals—to create a pop song that's in many ways more nuanced and fully realized than one ordinarily expects even from GBV. It's a particularly shining example of every note played on the guitar making a team-player contribution to the

overall arrangement.

"Cabin Essence" Brian Wilson
Per my countdown organization, there are eight songs from 2004 I rank higher than a key track from *Smile,* which ought to tell you that I consider 2004 to be an extraordinarily good music year (special thanks to Sue and Joe's 2004 mix CD for its typically valuable input). As with "Wonderful" and "Wind Chimes," Brian's voice has an odd character-actor quality at moments, but then at other moments transforms into the tenor of old, on the whole creating a superior complete result.

"Drink to Me, Babe, Then" A.C. Newman
This is probably my favorite thing from the New Pornographers camp since the explosive *Mass Romantic.* Besides the beautiful tune (including the very charming synth break) and the sassy line about "the boring choices rich kids choose," this is in the running for being the gold standard of early 2000s pop music production. Full but spare; here is a *fat* low end. Those toms woof like nobody's business even on the delicate iPod.

"Mahjong Dijon" Anton Barbeau
I know and have worked with Anton, so as much as I stand by the quality, his songs aren't discoveries I came by through honest random exposure. Anton shares an absurdist streak with Robyn Hitchcock; he hits on strong feelings from oblique angles, sometimes making them all the more pleasurable. I probably can't explain why "Mahjong, Dijon, give my life to you" rubs me the right way, but the most rewarding ever application of a Keith Emerson–style synthesizer solo is my idea of bankable.

"Let's Get Lost" Elliott Smith
Tragically, this tender and transporting admission of dysfunctionality is probably truer to life than a spiritual breakthrough like "Say Yes." "Let's Get Lost" is in fact so lovely a selling of the impulse toward isolation that after the song is over, you better understand the temptation to step into that world, as an inoculation against doing it for real.

"14 Shades of Green" Chris Stamey
Chris Stamey is the most underrated talent of the rock era, bar none. Watching "Happenstance" on a Swedish TV show on YouTube, I marvel at the level of quality at which he, and in this case the dB's, operate. This is hard rocking Chris—usually a good sign—and with a typical spanner in the works: a presumably sympathetic narrator announces, "Here's where we went to church/Here's where we robbed that store."

“First of the Gang to Die” Morrissey
From the most reliable Morrissey album, *You Are the Quarry*. I wasn’t sure I liked this song qua music as much as something like “I’m Not Sorry,” but it’s settled in as one of the best Morrissey lyric sets, which is as good as lyrics get. Maybe the icing is “He stole from the rich, and the poor/And the not very rich/And the very poor/And he stole all hearts away.”

“Naked As We Came” Iron and Wine
It galls me that this arrangement is so utterly perfect and effective with—I think—just a single acoustic guitar. Jesus, I thought I could play pretty guitar, right? It could be the single most successful instance of that; I’d have to ponder. I can testify that this is one of the rare songs that gets me on the verge of tears. “One of us will die inside these arms” is something like a decent shot at measuring the immeasurable value of a relationship.

“Common People” William Shatner
Maybe you have to have followed the scorn to which William Shatner’s, uh, vocals, have been subjected; the Star Trek era’s *The Transformed Man* may be *the* most (I would have to say justifiably) ridiculed major label release, with its overdramatized talk-singing of hipster material. With that context: the first minute of this talk-singing of the Pulp standard brings a true flood of emotion. You sense right away that it’s *really* good. Before long, it’s also obvious it can rock. Increasingly respectably, it’s blowing the doors off the Pulp version. Yet, you realize, it’s doing by and large just exactly what *The Transformed Man* did. It’s like that whole sorry endeavor is being incendiarily redeemed. This is all happening too fast. By the time Joe Jackson appears out of nowhere to sing the chorus out-of-his-mind greatly, you realize all bets are off for this amazing piece of music, and perhaps for life in general.

“Death of a City” Ken Stringfellow
These are words you don’t plan to say, but it takes a truly remarkable piece of music to beat William Shatner. Here’s another case where I know and have worked with Mr. Stringfellow, so it’s for you to judge whether I’m responding too socially, but to my ears it’s an uncanny achievement. A piano torch song about “the death of a city, and nobody really cares” (are we to think post-grunge Seattle?) is just right in all the lyrical details (I love “closed circuit cameras are making their sweep/They look down on grass turning brown”), but the story here is modulations; it’s almost blues, but drier, and unconstrained. It goes way out into space yet is able to bring it home. The extended bridge’s return to the verse with “sometimes that’s all you get to know” is sublime.

2005

"This Year" The Mountain Goats
Ever since Dan Vallor played me "The Bad Doctor" from *Songs for Petronius*—in, what, 1992?—John Darnielle has had a strange way of getting stuck in my head. I wouldn't have guessed that this much later he'd be doing very respectable business (sometimes the music industry actually works), and with the momentous 2005 development of Kristine getting me my first iPod, there became such a thing as catching up with other releases of people like that—in this case thanks to a Joe Becker recommendation.

"Girl" Beck
Sue Trowbridge and Joe Mallon's best-of-year CDs are what originally inspired me to start this project, and this is one of several selections that I pinch from theirs.

"My Doorbell" The White Stripes
They're a lot like Led Zeppelin in that they can be melodically simple without ever being melodically undernourished. They can take a fairly simple Mixolydian progression (people, there's no stopping me since reading that Wiki chord progression article) and add a line about ringing my doorbell, and the thing hops and bops and drips music out of every pore. There's a great touch where you can hear him wandering around the room away from the microphone while singing the bridge.

"1 Thing" Amerie
This is one of those 2000s R&B hits like "Crazy" that are based on a sample with a little bit of deliberate imprecision in the looping that gives it an interesting tang of arty sophistication. "1 Thing" does it with an extremely elaborate Meters percussion sample, and adds an uncrowded but decidedly complex grid of downstroke chords and vocal gymnastics. Amerie gets plenty of industry respect, so I needn't go on, but it's startling how well she and the team make this all work.

"Goodbye Caroline" Aimee Mann
More outstanding packaging on this one: graphics and a booklet look like a fifties noir paperback with the lyrics printed as text on yellowed pages and a floridly dramatic oil painting of a prize fight. The lyrics actually sustain a thread about a junkie fighter.

"No Wonder" Neil Young
His father's death and his own brush with death are usually mentioned when talking about *Prairie Wind,* and "No Wonder" is certainly one sober piece of work, what with church bells and which

bluebird is the one to take me home. Only in a Neil Young song—and this is the great thing about Neil—will you get lines like "9/11…I'll always remember something Chris Rock said/'Don't send no more candles, no matter what you do.'" Humorous and oddly unforgettable, I doubt I know what it means with any precision, but without reckless guesses why am I here? I'll venture that he may mean that too much memorializing threatens a subtly unhealthy social unity beholden to death.

"I Bet You Look Good on the Dancefloor" Arctic Monkeys
Nineteen-year-old Alex Turner's unmistakably English and entirely believable dance club banter has the backing of a fast, precise, toughened-up band that in my small world I imagine derives from ska. Can't say I understand why they were *quite* such a big deal, except that, once again, English people just do this crazy word-of-mouth thing periodically and that's a lot more fun than what we do here.

"Jesusland" Ben Folds
After the Ben Folds Five debut and the Shatner album I probably love Ben Folds for life; I'm not sure what his gripe is in these lyrics exactly (I have to think a travelogue about a nameless suburb called "Mosesland" would leave some unanswered questions), but the little slightly Philip Glass–inspired piano tag is aces.

"Feel Like Myself" Brendan Benson
I'm an uncommon case of being a Brendan Benson fan before I was a Jack White fan. *Alternative to Love* didn't have quite the high points of yore, but I still approached the Raconteurs with a little more sense of Jack having an opportunity to work with Brendan than the other way around.

"The Only Difference Between Martyrdom and Suicide Is Press Coverage"
Panic! at the Disco
"I'm so ignorant I apparently don't know enough to dislike this group as much as nature intends. First, as some people know, I lack the gene for being annoyed by long song titles. It's kind of like mimes (whose influence, interestingly, PATD may not have completely escaped); it's a cliché to hate mimes, right? Well, I'm that guy there going "wow, it looks just like he's in an invisible box!" "Swear to shake it up if you swear to listen/We're still so young, desperate for attention" just seems amusingly self-aware to me, and with a hot little damn tune. It happens not to be true that martyrdom and suicide are the same except for press coverage, but it's also not true that God is a concept by which we measure our pain; not so easy to go docking those kinds of points, y'know?

"Cells" Teenage Fanclub
Spanning fifty years, this survey I'm doing started out interactive, with

readers choosing what year I did, and that causes the endgame to be a study in contrasts; the last few years are the earliest and latest years because, statistically speaking, nobody picked them. One thing it's clear you didn't get in years at the early end of this project was "Cells" by Teenage Fanclub: a beautiful folk song about aging that goes, "Breaking down, cells breaking down." It's not quite literal lament, not quite absurdist humor. It's a little odd to reflect that while 1957 people would not have the slightest idea what to do with such a tone —Ernie Kovacs and the Kingston Trio just couldn't be shoved together into the same room—it's probably pedestrian vocabulary today. My six-year-old could probably watch an episode of *SpongeBob,* then hear "Cells," then watch a Zoloft commercial. Then maybe crank some Tortoise.

"Just Friends" Nine Black Alps
Big fuzz guitar, fuzz vocal hooks put this Manchester alt-pop right into the skull. Rob Schnapf—who, Don Dixon–like, I only know as the *other* guy besides Tom Rothrock who produced Beck and Elliott Smith—went on to do the Vines, so aggressive youngsters must have become his thing.

"Conversations" The Posies
Jon Auer didn't take a day off from crafting great music in the mid-2000s; his break-out Big Star moment (read on) only barely surpasses this Posies return to form, whose unhurried stroll up perilous baroque scales and back to meaty rock are an immense favorite of everyone in my household. I must have listened to this song a hundred times by now and it never gets old.

"I Predict a Riot" Kaiser Chiefs
In the relative latter-day isolation that is my dad-dom, I mentally tuck a song like this away as an obscure find, then one day I learn, oh, the Kaiser Chiefs are *immensely famous.* I'd be the guy in 1969 playing you a Doors song, warning you, hey, these guys can be kind of dark. So, the Kaiser Chiefs remind me a little of the Jam, maybe with a little more singerly croon. Oh, you *know* the Kaiser Chiefs?

"Gold Digger" Kanye West
Then I guess one or two of you might also know this, hands down my favorite hip-hop recording. First, screamingly funny; but, a huge musical success. The beat is phenomenal—the way it develops with the Jamie Foxx lines up through the clav riff. Just as impressive is the way Kanye skirts the line between rapping and singing. It's like a plausible set of pitches to deliver natural conversation with, but they modulate in and out of working as melody lines. And so many great one-liners here: "She walking round looking like Michael wit' your money."

"How Many Worlds" Brian Eno

I don't know about you, but a new Brian Eno vocal album was a pretty big deal for me. *Another Day on Earth* doesn't dive right back into crazy "King's Lead Hat"/"Third Uncle" territory as might have been my adolescent fantasy, but there's "How Many Worlds," the most transfixingly beautiful piece of music he's ever done. There's a simple and homely but enlightened wisdom–laden verse: "How many people will we feed today/How many lips will we kiss today, if we wake up?" This eases into an extended string-led instrumental passage I can only describe as *New Age* if I had to pick a style category, but with disarming subtlety, precision, and dramatic range.

"Friends to Go" Paul McCartney
Another of Paul's periodic stunning successes, this Nigel Godrich production was played entirely by Paul and would have been, oh, in the top one-fifth of his Beatles output. The half-time drum meter with the piano and backing vocals tugging at an uptempo pound, the hard slam from minor to major key mid-verse, the confession of social awkwardness—it's easy to believe a story line that has Godrich smacking Macca around like the non–yes-men mates who knew him when.

"Lady Sweet" Big Star
Considering how left-field was its perception, *In Space* picked up in surprisingly close proximity to where the seventies Big Star left off, with Alex Chilton hell-bent on underproduced R&B mischief but still in the gravity well of the Tommy Hoehns and Jon Tivens of the world willing to coax Byrds-influenced pop like "She Might Look My Way." "Lady Sweet" succeeds beyond the wildest dreams of such efforts, one guesses mostly bypassing Alex entirely and letting a principal disciple take a crack. No doubt the mind maintains a stubborn semiotic reluctance to accept a song branded as Big Star but sung by the Posies' Jon Auer as a music milestone as one would "Thirteen" or "Kanga Roo"—to which I'd say, you didn't accept those at the time either, ya doof! Give yourself a slap and get over it. With—against all odds—musical gifts worthy of Big Star's best, "Lady Sweet" hints at ethereal longing well enough with a line like "what I see is so exactly what I need to find" and then leveraging the Big Star device of nailing inexpressibility with an adolescent blurting-out like "I know she can't be beat."

"Casimir Pulaski Day" Sufjan Stevens
[Come on feel the] Illinois[e] may have the most sheer presence of mind of any album since *Sergeant Pepper*. It doesn't come right at you. It goes three songs without threatening to be anything but elaborately peculiar, and then there are "John Wayne Gacy, Jr." and "Jacksonville," which hit you up both sides of the head with indisputable proof that he can do both lyrics and music very, very well. Yet, then three *good-enough* cuts allow you to cool down: "Gacy" is a button-pusher, you reflect as these amble by, then you don't remember why "Jacksonville" was really all *that* good. And then come "Chicago" and "Casimir Pulaski Day," after which there's little

question that you're listening to the album of the year, and probably the decade. It has to be said that Sufjan's first impression can in general be a little annoying (I sniffed at his previous album)—the catch in his voice seems like a device, the arrangements seem a little Belle and Sebastian but more heaped-up than orchestrated. "Chicago" is the best demonstration of the fact that what I identified as a flawed process is really getting the job done better than what I would have posited as a good process: it's a little like the *Remain in Light* via *Breakfast in America* method (be a faux-naif but a soul man, overinstrument)—two objectionable projects in my book—but Sufjan's able to conjure and redouble the moments of success that happened in both. Then there's "Casimir Pulaski Day," one of the key songs of our time. First, it made me cry—real tears—which is extremely rare. Second, it put a Christian sentiment across. That is no small deal. It's a song about the delicate first stages of falling in love, during which time the object of his affections contracts bone cancer, and the singer continues to nurture the ever-fragile romance to the fatal end. Yes, button-pusher again, but by now the man has earned your cooperation; you move back and give him room to work, and he doesn't disappoint. It starts out with decent set-up, a little faux-naif but nothing problematic. Then, starting with the second verse, he makes his move: "Tuesday night at the bible study/We lift our hands and pray over your body/But nothing ever happens." How can anyone not be *right there* at that point? Not only is the song's emotional battery now fully charged, but he's suddenly and unexpectedly got most religious skeptics by the scruff of the neck; it's earnest faith, but if that's proselytizing, it has the virtue of subtlety! I can't go into all of why the rest is so good, but the use of repetition alone is phenomenal: "with [your/my] shirt tucked in and [your/my] shoes untied…"; "in the morning…"; "all the glory…"; "and the complications…." The intensity of the singer's loss is finally focused with Dantean adroitness: the belief that "He [capital H] took our place" is a challenge to suffer great sadness without resorting to emotional distancing strategies. "On the first of March, on *the holiday"*—Casimir Pulaski Day—an Illinois spring holiday notably not Easter, unrelated to resurrection, "I thought I saw you breathing." The naive tone after this achievement then reads as real and earned sensitivity. "John Wayne Gacy, Jr." reads in retrospect as a more formidable phenomenologist's admonition that there but for the grace of God go we.

2006

"I'm a Strong Lion" Robert Pollard
Starting off the pretty great year of 2006 is the 23rd track on *From a Compound Eye,* clocking in at 1:08, yet another little wonder from Robert Pollard. Like many articles from his new wave closet, it's as catchy as anything, and makes you wonder why some boring egomaniacs need 1:45 or even 2:15. Varying two choruses of "I'm a strong lion, been tryin', the Lord likes me that way" with a third that ends "the boys like me that way" is intriguing—maybe a way of being okay with piety to a degree, but wary of some spiritual impulses as populist at heart.

"The Werewolf of Bretton Woods" Tris McCall and the New Jack Trippers
An enchanting, almost-too-brief electric piano riff brackets a coolly sung, charismatically arranged hip-hop narration of life as an indie music scenester, buying a guitar on "the only credit card that [he hasn't] maxed." Knowing Tris, there is undoubtedly a lot of local culture I can't help you with, like what Bretton Woods, werewolves, and "a new continent of earth and fire" (from "We Can Be Together," the 1969 Jefferson Airplane invitation to civil war) have to do with the life.

"Roscoe" Midlake
Whatever you're doing when you listen to Midlake, prepare for them to take over your entire mental picture of the day. There's never been anything quite like *The Trials of Van Occupanther;* maybe its closest taxonomic neighbor is the America of "Horse with No Name": musically it's west coast soft rock circa 1972, lyrically it's a sort of epic poetry of an imagined civilization, with elements of past cultures ranging from a century removed to proto-human antiquity coexisting with each other. It manages to evoke a longing for the type of community based in primitive sacrality that is probably vanishing from the world in this generation.

"Then the Letting Go" Bonnie "Prince" Billy
This Celtic-influenced country folk shares something of a keen literary ear with Lou Reed, and in fact has moments of reminding me of "All Tomorrow's Parties" in ways I can't put my finger on. Dawn McCarthy's distant, ringing response vocals are perfect for a literally haunted ballad concerning what seems to be a potential second generation of snow death events, the latter possibly thwarted, or compounded, by the ghost of the former, by appropriating "her skin as my skin to go out in the snow." This is certainly an extraordinary and luminous creation, but might one question a spiritual approach of WWEGD: What Would Ed Gein Do?

"Museum of Sex" Robyn Hitchcock and the Venus 3
Peter Buck, Scott McCaughey, Bill Rieflin, and some progenitors of a great saxophone part contribute to this swinging celebration of how music and transitory physical existence redeem each other. You don't want to send just anyone to do that job, and the head office had the sense to put Robyn on it; he nails the presentation.

"Calling On Mary" Aimee Mann
From an amusing interstitial Christmas release called *One More Drifter in the Snow,* "Calling On Mary," despite a lost-love motif that can function as attenuation, seems to mean more or less the real thing: calling on she who intervenes for the repentant. "When I was young I couldn't see/All that my true love gave to me" is pretty believable as late-acquired self-knowledge. That "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas" refrain *really* sticks in your head.

"I Was a Lover" TV on the Radio
The results from this fiendish sample laboratory are eerily impressive. In a way they're the musical descendants of a hundred bad 1985 rap records having way too much fun with a vocal sample ma-ma-ma-ma- mapped to a keyboard key, or the dreaded "orchestra hit," but in a way all their own, the Radio say quality. The snare seems like a cool-sounding composite of snare and hand-clap (maybe I'm dreaming), and the detuney horns and sitar are just wrong enough to be brilliant. "I was a lover before this war" is quite a grabber of an opening line, and there's an epic sonic expedition going on that's winningly exotic (the white noise sections) and climactic (the end piano riff).

"Maybe There's a World" Yusuf
Somewhat incredibly, it seems like he is back to being able to make music at about the level of late 1971's *Teaser and the Firecat,* which is not quite as good as *Mona Bone Jakon* and *Tea for the Tillerman,* but is definitely up there, for anyone. That "how nice" is as affecting a lyrical touch as he's ever been capable of.

"The Long Way Round" The Dixie Chicks
Country music doesn't ordinarily ring my bell; it's one of those genres that act like all of classical music just never happened, and my ears don't quite stand for that. I don't mean to pretend that's a consequence of my classical training or sophistication, which are unimpressive, but probably something more like having a hard time with single-malt scotch on account of being so used to Bloody Marys and piña coladas. Whatever it says about me, this is country with just enough contamination by Vivaldi, or something, for me to be interested. I can appreciate an anthem of mental toughness like this, too, and although some lines like "My friends from high school… Moved into houses/With the same zip codes where their parents lived" are a bit hardened into smugness (oh, to rough it without that cheap signifier of progress), the Chicks have earned their stripes.

“All Too Much” Gomez
For a full two minutes, this song is not only boring, it’s boring in the problem way of this decade: vocalist character acting. It’s the Tom Waits/Björk effect: the more underbite, cold symptoms, and bear growl you inflect, the more authentic the music must be. A few Cat Powers and Devendra Banharts make life interesting, but there’s a fine line between that and Jimmy Durante doing the sad verse after Frosty melts. Anyway, two minutes into the song, bam, the chorus hits, and from then on it’s an amazing recording with everyone doing everything right. Including the singer, and especially the bass player—nice.

“Steady as She Goes” The Raconteurs
This and the apparently Benson-ier “Hands” I think are both great, and I flip-flop day to day on which one to pick. But when a large number of people like an actual good pop song, I’d like to contribute to the momentum in my own small way. Interesting to hear White with a conventional crack rhythm section—no slight intended to Meg, who I think is great and one of a kind.

“Waves of Wonder” The Moore Brothers
The Moore Brothers are a remarkable duo whose pinnacle in my opinion occurred here on the Kill Rock Stars acoustic compilation, *Sound the Hare Heard.* It recalls earliest childhood memories of inclusion, exclusion, awakening, and going forth into the coming high season, to a vocal arrangement that is as confident and in some ways more evocative than Simon and Garfunkel at their mid-sixties best.

“Six Feet Under” Jon Auer
I’d known Ken Stringfellow for years and it was interesting to hear a full album from the one I always thought of as the Other Posy. He did a great job, too, which is not surprising given his terrific Posies and Big Star contributions the year before. This oddly touching and memorable what’s-it-all-for song places Jon’s velvety voice over a repeating piano theme that conjures visions of the Wonka kids stepping into the chocolate room.

“Microscopic View” Pernice Brothers
Live a Little is a fantastic album—not only my favorite album of theirs, but the step up for them I was waiting for for some time, and my favorite album of this year. “Microscopic View” is probably the nicest musical invention, but the record is packed with high points. Missing, say, “Cruelty to Animals” seems unconscionable.

“Rich Wife” The Long Winters
John Roderick has a world-class voice for high-volume, matter-of-fact pronouncements (sort of a more grown-up Harvey Danger—the

connection makes sense), and the precise, punchy "Rich Wife" is the best vehicle for it I've heard. They have a gift for zingers, too: "You're in love with someone you don't like/You should have been a rich wife," and especially the passing "When you consider yourself/And you *do* consider yourself…"

"Backstabber" The Dresden Dolls
With their Cabaret/goth get-up and the most petulant set of lyrics I can remember, I somehow wouldn't peg them as really *me;* but the talent and power here are unstoppable. Accomplished almost entirely on piano and drums with harmony vocals, there is a truly sensational percussiveness, hitting smart as well as hard, but hard indeed, on both keys and skins. Not only is there musical depth around the corner of every measure, there's a playful intelligence to what initially comes off as just a punky put-down of some music biz rival. The accusation of "backstabber" is varied predictably with "hope-crusher," but then with "fit-haver" and "off-brusher."

"All She Wrote" Ray Davies
This is no less than one of the ten best Ray Davies songs ever, and I think my single favorite vocal he's ever done. There's some little way he draws out the vibrato an extra couple of milliseconds at the ends of lines that makes you feel a little extra pang of tragedy for the song's jilted Lothario. "Now you can mix in those swinging circles/Single bars and gay cafes/With pickup lines to impress young schoolgirls/ And big Australian barmaids." You have to be a terrific writer to capture the futility of unfaithfulness in so few words, to say nothing of the craftsmanly use of the word "gay."

"Monster Hospital" Metric
My wife used to regularly watch the TV show *Grey's Anatomy,* which I learned had appreciable effect on market tastes in sensitive, lightly character-acted ballads. Ordinarily not my particular I.V. bag, its music could occasionally hit, most memorably with this little bomb. It's in some unignorable ways a stupid song but, well, play it again! It starts apparently doomed to be one of those shrill, distorted vocal things and have chords that want to be adventurous but really make no sense, but then it's not and they do. The chorus—"I fought the war but the war won"—is a stroke of genius, and the musical bridges and breakdowns all sound like people who unquestionably know what they're doing.

"Harbour Bridge" Don McGlashan
I had heard scattered material from the Mutton Birds before—"While You Sleep" from 1996 was my favorite—but this was the first time I witnessed singer Don McGlashan's awesome power to write a pop folk song as beautiful as anything Peter, Paul, and Mary might have done. His singing is melodious if usually a little sleepy, but here is invested with a subtle weight, not unlike the "tons of Japanese steel" that underlie the graceful and all-too-utilitarian bridge.

“The Blues Are Still Blue” Belle and Sebastian

By 2006, the early ’00s mastering volume wars and alienation pageantry were yielding to a world that was more Seals, Crofts, Belle, and Sebastian. I keep loving this song more and more. It didn’t leap out at me right away; besides the killer chorus, the special appeal is how gently the song’s characters who are made fun of are treated. Ordinarily a “part-time punk” is the person the songwriter is really getting the knife out for, but here he’s a kid from school, he’s trying to get mamas and papas to “be a little cool,” and even though we decide he’s shallow and ridiculous, we like him and remember acting a lot like him. The whole song has such a light touch with sympathy and humanity it takes a bit of time for it to sink in that Belle and Sebastian have moved to a higher plane of abilities. The year 2006 is like that in general. It doesn’t hit you over the head with new innovations or worthy superstars, but generally speaking, little people in music are doing good work that makes progress on its own terms. Anyway, how about that chorus? “I left my washing in the launderette/You can put some money on it, you can make a little bet/That when I see my washing/The white will be grey and the black will be grey/But the blues are still blue.” (It varies “washing” with “lady.”) The black and white of you vs. them will come out in the wash, but everyone will always still have feelings; bring a little love.

2007

“Bodysnatchers” Radiohead
Starting out with Radiohead sure screams “not that well-informed about this recent a year,” doesn’t it? Nolo contendere, no lo siento. I will tell my grandkids about how I bought this in the days where you had to go to their website and buy it for an amount of money of your own choosing. Or, wait, did I just buy it on Amazon? I honestly can’t remember now. But if I had to guess the amount I paid, I’m inclining towards recalling that I was a real mensch.

“Best Mistake” The Disciplines
This is a curious case of a Norwegian band just shy of metal fronted by the Posies’ Ken Stringfellow, whose range can include about anything. They’re actual stars in some corners of the world. The first release was this grabby post-“Seven Nation Army” seven-inch vinyl single, capturing Ken’s voice before he’d settled into a winningly project-specific, subtly Memphis Minnie–influenced style.

“Sugar Baby” Kristin Hersh
Of the Throwing Muses ladies, my interest in Kristin Hersh lagged my interest in Tanya Donelly. She’s less ingratiating; the bitter and ironic play for my attention that is the album *Learn to Sing Like a Star* charms like a wizened, chain-smoking anti-Madonna. Now we’re talking!

“Where Are We?” Shalini
I’ve made records with Mitch Easter and with Shalini Chatterjee, and what they needed was a nice long break from me to come up with this terrific result! Mitch is back in top rocking form on *two* 125 Records–distributed blockbusters this year, with Shalini adding star vocals and patented what-is-she-thinking phrases like “fruitcake museum” that jell with complete unpredictability into nifty hooks like that “Hello Bedlam switchboard” part.

“Melody Day” Caribou
Somewhere between Olivia Tremor Control and the Left Banke, Caribou distinguish themselves among Deerhunter, Deerhoof, and other bands of their elk. In part, this is because they overreach their abilities to perform the parts—and that happens to be exactly what my ears want to hear these days. The flute obbligatos, hissy harmonies, and clattering percussion are herded en masse into a strangely coherent stampede.

“Phantom Limb” The Shins
It took me twice as long to decide I liked this song as it usually takes me to decide I like a song. If I could go back and explain it to my

earlier self, here's what I'd say: first, that woah-oh-oh chorus that seemed a little pointless to be receiving so much focus is still pointless. Ignore it. Kids may sing along at shows. That one line is saying, "Stepping over what now towers to the sky"—yeah, good, huh?—and that bit has to be recognized as the real melodic centerpiece. The verse is alienation poetry; don't get in a big fight with it. Let lines like "family portrait circa '95" add a little color, and don't get annoyed when James Mercer doesn't do your idea of hitting heavy.

"Tick Tick Boom" The Hives

I'm generally against the new volume inflation, but every now and then something comes along and you have to say: yeah, this just *is* immense. It's not a victory for unsubtle sonics, as I'm more comfortable pronouncing; it orchestrates loud, simple, unison hooks with life and depth—fine headbanging craftsmanship. "I've done it before and I can do it some more" is a deft stroke of the loudmouth's brush.

"Stronger" Kanye West

Kanye's home computer scrapbook graphics with the teddy bear going through stages of higher education are, I will admit right up front, something I would never have come up with. And they're great, but fans of organic, human-touch music should take a hint from these graphics and approach with caution, because the game here is production impact for a broad audience: the vocoder arpeggios are the Bugs Bunny of this *Space Jam.* Part of Kanye's appeal is his Larry-Ellison-reading-*The-Art-of-War* seriousness about the business end; among the elite guard of the war on haters, he's the field marshal quoting Nietzsche.

"Colleen" Ted Leo and the Pharmacists

I became a big fan at *The Tyranny of Distance,* but that seemed to be followed by a period of being more political and rhythmic, less literary and tuneful. That's probably not a bad career direction; the people whose sensitive, personal material I admire are usually the sad kids hanging out on oblivion's doorstep. Also, not all *Tyranny* was grabber; not until "Under the Hedge" did I really go, "Now this is good." The tortured introspection may never quite return in full force, but "Colleen" is a good enough synthesis of that era with the drive of material like "Where Have All the Rude Boys Gone."

"Cocaine Blanket" 24 Satellites

This is a great find (thanks, Bradley)—a three-piece from Chico with a confident, unhurried southern blues style. I keep thinking Alex Chilton would love it. They have a good eye for human nature and ear for turns of phrase: "I tried to fight it but I got so excited/At the prospect of a terrifying night all alone"; "Just go home, just go home"; "Could white lies and a cocaine blanket ever cover this up?"

"Time Warping" Mitch Easter
Those who cannot remember the eighties are doomed to repeat them, and the 2000s Mr. Easter, producer of Pavement and Ken Stringfellow, has powerful antibodies. With a surprising amount of modern sheen, and as much emotional complexity, more musical energy and purpose, and double the hook density of Let's Active, "Time Warping" lacks only that band's visionary urban youth air, sensibly replaced by the mantle of prog-sympathizer who occasionally reveals pride in being a Dixie bar musician.

"All the Things That Go to Make Heaven and Earth" The New Pornographers
"Success was survival, and kid, it still is": the next step in the NPs' parade of snappy tunes cum tractatus logico-philosophicus elbows you as a critique of considering evolution to be a replacement of spirituality. Etymologically astute—"success"— which requires outliving (succeeding) something else—is "survival gone too far." You can never be at spiritual peace if you define consciousness to be evolving; you have to be plotting the death of your inferiors.

"Suffer for Fashion" Of Montreal
By 2007, Of Montreal had transformed fairly completely from amateurish, personal-touch minimalism to eclectic flamboyance that is relatively slick. The drum machine basis still whispers home recording, in a good way, but the facility with musical nuance and flourish here is remarkable.

"Red Is the Color" Steve Earle
I've never really had a musical overlap with what Steve Earle does, but this one is too serious a threat to life and limb to ignore. I think this must be mandolin; Steve is singing over this lonesome instrument, singing in an unimaginably drunken, bitter mood about some major imminent social collapse. Whatever you think is working for you, "Don't bet on getting by with that again." Then comes some harmonica—heavy on the *harm*—and then WHOMP, some kick drum about ten times the size you'd think sane people would put in an acoustic recording like this. Had enough? I hope not, because Steve is just getting started with what's on his mind, which is *all bad.*

"Ponytail" Panda Bear
I only get oblique, provincial glances at a music scene these days, and I really only know Animal Collective via this snatch of their drummer's solo album. But it's a beautiful little hyperreverberating cut, a sweet and positive round about never stopping growing, glowing, and caring, with music to match—that kids today identify as a Brian Wilson–centric style, though to someone who more or less remembers when *Pet Sounds* came out, that sounds just slightly like describing Gregorian chants or barbershop quartets as "Brian Wilson–

obsessed music."

"Our Life Is Not a Movie or Maybe" Okkervil River
Only after I was already in awe of their now-former keyboardist Jonathan Meiburg's side project Shearwater did these Austin folks come highly recommended to me by my friend Terry at the train station. They approach music with a strong sense of—no, let's say, *obsession with* theater—not just the grandiose vocals and Bowiesque surprise sonics, but an overarching lyrical motif of life overlapping troublingly with performance. The album title, for example, is *The Stage Names,* and their next, *The Stand-Ins.* I chose the coming-of-age freakout "Our Life" over the exquisite "Savannah Smiles" by a hair. "Plus Ones" is another one it's hard to imagine not liking.

"You Got Yr. Cherry Bomb" Spoon
The wonderful Spoon franchise keeps honing the ability to be immensely evocative using only a few well-chosen elements. A xylophone and reverb on the tambourine are enough to make you feel like Berry Gordy is right in the next room putting the finishing touches on a Supremes record. The bari sax horn charts are premium ear candy, as is the little interlude with the treble turned off the vocals. I don't know what peace-loving, cherry-bomb-out-blowing vocal characterization the singer is doing, but it has to be the same one Tom Petty is doing on "Breakdown": Ricky Ricardo?

"Girls in Their Summer Clothes" Bruce Springsteen
It's Bruce Springsteen's best song ever. This is the most musically open he's ever been, reflecting a little Philip Glass in the strings and, if Dan Vallor and I aren't mistaken, a little Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields in the vocals. He also makes the most of today's stupid-loud mastering by cooking up a thick paste of a mix based on a freakishly trebly bass guitar I'm confused to admit I love.

"White Waves" Shearwater
Two songs into 2007's album champ *Palo Santo,* former Okkervil River keyboardist Jonathan Meiburg has articulated a rich, emotive style somewhere between Antony and the Johnsons and the Gipsy Kings. That's the perfect setup for "White Waves," which jolts us with a dimension of mastery of seventies rock. It's still in Brontean romanticist character, what with danger for travelers tonight and his shivering heart unbound and flayed alive, but all of that is rendered in rock stage skills with a perfect agility that recalls side two of Roxy Music's *Country Life.* Yet what's entirely special and innovative about *Palo Santo* is the authority with which it conjures depth—physical depth—and solemnity. You can sound flip quoting the lyrics as I do, but in the actual piece, talk of "something singing in the ice/In the deepest part of the wood" is legitimately menacing. Most of the credit goes to Meiburg's voice, which can roar with authority as easily as it can carry a solo moment with pin-drop stage command—ever seen the 1948 Olivier *Hamlet?*

2008

"Transliterator" DeVotchKa
I've made lists of my favorite songs and albums since 1972, and I've gone in and out of patterns of broad and narrow exposure to music. I only treated pop before this project. Some years I listened to radio incessantly, others not at all. Some years I got exposed to a hundred albums just from various labels giving me free stuff, other years I wasn't on the radar of a soul in the business. "We can all live in the breath you are wasting." Uh, what? Oh, sorry, that's not you responding to my writing, that's a great line from DeVotchKa's "Transliterator," reminding me, with its Slavic Pagliacci drawl and a malenky bit of the old ultraviolins, not to mope. Yes, in 2008 I was well out of it, but seldom have I somehow (well, friends, and the Internet) been aware of so much good music vying for limited space on my best-of list. So please share my enthusiasm as you join me in the [second to –ed.] last waltz.

"Forever" The Explorers Club
The genuinely meritorious Beach Boys pastiche is a genre at least as old as the Trade Winds' "New York's a Lonely Town," but this is amazing in both its total immersion, and for how subtly it captures the reality of the Beach Boys' scattershot efforts to break *out* of the Beach Boys mold. The cover graphic style screams Beach Boys 1965 but is set in some cold place with parkas—a reminder of mysterious decisions like the samurai getups on *Pet Sounds*. "Forever" delivers the unchained vocal clusters one would pre-identify as getting one's money's worth, but the innovation in musical engagement occurs in elements like the fuzz vocals' ungainly attempt to rock out on "Honey I Don't Know Why" or the bull's-eye incongruousness of a plunge into 1970 soul gospel on—the title cut!—"Freedom Wind."

"RoboCop" Kanye West
Nice ultradistorted kick-snare-tom-roll beat, plenty of Auto-Tune, eventually some nice-sounding "Bittersweet Symphony" level strings. There's this spoiled little L.A. girl, and is some things she don't need to know, like who he had before, only make her mad when she know—he don't need no RoboCop. Sure, you're thinking this is James Mercer from the Shins; believe it or not, it's actually Kanye West.

"What's This?!!" Teddy Thompson
I'm guessing if I were Teddy Thompson, I'd be tired of people who are interested in my music because of what it sounds like second, and because I'm Richard and Linda Thompson's kid first, so I—back to being Scott—am very pleased to report that this mildly Talking Heads–tinged hittoid stood out on a sampler afore I even knowed 'e were royalty.

“Scare Easy” Mudcrutch
Tom Petty reforms his old pre-Heartbreakers group to play a few songs live in the studio, and they sound scarily good. The guitar solo is the kind of high-wire act to put ProTools-fixing losers like myself in our place.

“The Ghosts Are All Right” The Bye Bye Blackbirds
I’ve knocked around with Oakland bright light Bradley Skaught—played a guitar solo on the 2004 Belle da Gama project, done some one-off live shows. This bluegrass-
based cut is my favorite Bradley composition and vocal: a Byrds-worthy meditation on history and responsibility in a local community, focused, I’m guessing, on his native Tacoma, Washington.

“Best Broken Dream” Heiskell
Is that clucking I hear? Because it’s time for verse two and Jeff Heiskell is about to lay an egg. I really don’t feel any better recommending this song when it’s going on about rocking in between the sheets than I would Ted Nugent, but then there’s “my little nightmare/sleeping right there,” and—okay—he’s back. Completely surprisingly, this is a piece of melody writing too good to ignore pretty much regardless of whatever happened lyrically, and Heiskell’s 2008 album is in fact a bit of a revelation all around.

“There’s a Law” The Disciplines
It’s like the madeleine in Proust. That guitar solo at 1:47 lasts all of maybe ten seconds but there’s something about it that harkens back to an aspect of rock that was perfected around 1969 to ’70 and then slowly but surely stopped being there to get in touch with. And Ken Stringfellow—the new Memphis Minnie vocals Ken Stringfellow—hits his disciplined stride here. These guys are a raw-power-house live.

“Trashcan” Delta Spirit
Capable of punkworthy bash and vocal shred, Delta Spirit give country blues mannerisms new life on a bona fide Rounder Records release. The chorus is “My love is coming I can barely hardly wait” (I think) and the song is called “Trashcan”; what will these kids today come up with next?

“Dark Leaves Form a Thread” Destroyer
“It’s cool, you go, I’ll stay/Perfectly at home with this dread” is one of the arresting collisions of naturalistic conversation and dreamscape phantasmagoria to be expected from Dan Bejar’s main project, Destroyer. To my ears, this is Destroyer’s most musically sophisticated and satisfying song yet. Bitter comment about living in America… drink a shot!

"Living Well Is the Best Revenge" R.E.M.
Here's how personally R.E.M. took Republican presidential victories. If you acknowledge their self-styled return to form as exulting at Bush's facing regime change, consider that Bush's sad and lost apostles are remembered humming *his*—Michael Stipe's—name and flaring their nostrils. For following a mandate of direct, plainspoken liberal politics, its emotional realities may be a bit too easy to imagine coming out of a resentful Republican victor's mouth, but since I happen to be on the artist's side, let's call it instant justice. If not the big event that is a new youth-culture esprit de corps, it's certainly the big event that is a new canon-worthy R.E.M. rocker: the ears do perk up at this opening riff, feeling that something a bit more the real thing than "Bad Day" is at hand.

"Borrowing Time" Aimee Mann
The surprising highlight of this delicious pop treat from the ultradependable Aimee is a brilliant unison trombone solo. "I was happy with what I had yesterday" is as good a succinct statement of well-being as "She wants the beautiful child the blood will bring her" is disturbing Anne Sextonian art.

"Surprise" Gnarls Barkley
This *is* a surprise, since I thought "Crazy" was eerily overrated. The lyrics are tops ("when all you need is to be met half-way but nobody tries/Don't be surprised"), especially the lyric *pattern,* which was a Bob Dylan specialty: every verse leads up to the same penultimate rhyme (with "-ies," like "tries" above), then the payoff is always "Don't be surprised." If those Mamas and Papas "pa-pas" are live, credit is due for making them sound like a cleverly employed sample. I love the little fadeout improv where he sings, "Surprise you baby, 'prise you baby" just like "please you baby, please you baby" in Prince's "The Beautiful Ones."

"Fantastic 6" Alphabeat
I heard this in the most unexpected of my new listening discovery portals—Jamba Juice. I'm not always a fan of the style (eighties-derived dance music selected for how well it goes with the sound of several blenders) but within character, someone at Corporate has good ears a surprising percentage of the time. In the primitive pre-Shazam days of early 2008, I had to Google words, so it was a slight challenge identifying this as the non-iTunes Danish band Alphabeat. I'm not sure whether they're sort of a kids' band but when I noticed their cover of "Public Image" (which sadly is pretty bad), I was sold. Anyway, this a simple but very compelling hip-hop dance beat, and the chorus ("Eins, zwei, drei / Weltpolizei!") is dead catchy and rather sophisticated—great little accent on the 16th note right after every other 4 count. The lyrics have a crazed wit that seems only partially attributable to not being native English speakers: "They have crash helmets on/Just like Major Tom!"; "It's the making of a miracle/Every time they save chicks." Anyway, it slays me.

"Stagg Field" Rachel Taylor Brown
Here's a gem. Ms. Brown has a jazz singer's confidence in any jumble of words in her mouth; if Annie Ross were looking for material today, she might be delighted to happen onto "Heavy uranium under radiated grass/Feed the geranium, walk your unprotected ass/To the gymnasium." I think this is a bedroom overdub project, and for one of those it has incredible ensemble energy, led by a positively bopping piano.

"Juliet of the Spirits" The B-52's
For being dangerously close to a one-joke novelty group that delivered the punch line 29 years ago, the B-52's have really had legs. For one thing, rated strictly as a joke, they've done great—Fred Schneider has always been very funny. But they're also as musically rich as anybody, and deserve credit for a serious style innovation: the high-energy pop number where Kate and Cindy challenge the key changes with mixolydian acrobatics; the first was "52 Girls." A new one is cause for rejoicing, and "Juliet of the Spirits" is possibly the best ever—upping their high art points with an unobtrusive Fellini reference.

"American Gangster Time" Elvis Costello and the Imposters
One listens to "Clean Money" turn into "Love for Tender" around late '79 and says yeah, this was the time to move on. Yet time has told that Elvis barking along with Steve Nieve's Farfisa on something like "Pump It Up" is highest order musical milestone stuff, enough to bear Elvis's checking in every five years to find out to what extent he can still do it. This is a great one of those, maybe the best—when the harmony vocals go up on "It's a drag," you get a rush of the old pop/wave motherlode being tapped—but the genuinely disturbing lyrics are as noteworthy: another more detailed, more needling installment of Elvis's recurring nightmare of occupational corruption and sexual debasement.

"Pop Lie" Okkervil River
This is the closest of second-place finishers, and these two could be the two best of the decade. And, this one starts out so bad! 1978 my-home-recording bad. Listen to the last 30 seconds to absorb the instrumental and vocal nuance these people are capable of, then forgive that out of the gate come dreadful not-quite-tuned harmony synths (that it so happens I love, but this song is really a critique of me, Scott Miller, so bear with me). Rescue is nevertheless immediately forthcoming in the form of a very clever response burst of acoustic strumming—ahh—and from there it's a three-ring circus of success. The vocals! Will Sheff's emotional victim King-Lear-played-by-Jonathan-Richman mode can go both ways; here he is simply handing down utter contempt, and it is glorious. It's intriguing that the arrangement is more bubblegummy than you'd expect from their usual hankering after resonance, so it invites consideration as the cultural target, but it's synth pop from 1979–80 that is no particular pied piper

threat today—much more something, well, *I'd* like. I've made more peace with popular content than Will, and I'm surprised at how enthusiastic I am to hear such an articulate denouncement of it. What a joyous emotional tangle this is—betrayal seething, our singer is in a condemning mood, but the invective keeps pointing straight back to the very man on stage with the microphone. One of the most sophisticated pieces of social science in years looks at the pop fandom system, and is utterly horrified: fans carefully select entertainment whose self-serving lie best propitiates their self-serving vanities. In Sheff's unimprovable words, "the man who dreamed up the dream that they wrecked their hearts upon." Half the rhymes in the song are to "-ated," and with that constraint, dig the social architecture set up in the following: "Get completely incorporated/By some couple who consummated/Their first love by the dawn/A falling star wished upon/That fried in the sky and was gone." This isn't just he done her wrong, this is, for one thing, a bunch of people: crowd dynamics. This is, okay, the first couple witnessing the second couple, and getting "incorporated." The fourth wall of the relationship in isolation is broached, and we see the pop lie at work: fame, peer pressure, whatever, mediated the romance, but it is not really a guiding star. It steals what it needs for a third party's music career, or whatever, and then is gone over the horizon. We're almost out of time and I haven't raved enough about the band and the tune, so please just trust me on this, and go out and grab two big handfuls of this band, immediately.

"He Doesn't Know Why" Fleet Foxes

Almost any year, nothing beats "Pop Lie," and any era could do a lot worse for its ironically bearded thought leaders than Will Sheff and Fleet Foxes' terrific, humble, and radiant Robin Pecknold. A much bigger deal commercially—have a chance to get to a Starbucks in 2008?—Robin is arguably as gifted a lyricist on balance, and the band presents a much more polished musical gestalt. Their specialty is those reverberating harmonies, but the soft-mallet North American tribal drumming figures prominently, too—the cabin essence Beach Boys retracing the steps of the American Indian from the misty pines to the lonesome cattle calls crossing the plains. Foremost, Robin's powers of conventional music composition are enormous. The Yale Wiffenpoofs will search in vain for better new material than "White Winter Hymnal." "He Doesn't Know Why" is unquestionably in the top five of melodies from this decade I'd pick to go toe-to-toe with something by Felix Mendelssohn in a contest of which one the most people in the intervening period would find appealing. His every change refracts light and glows anew with longing reconsidered, then deepened. He doesn't write love songs, just songs about friends and family members whose relationship or sheer well-being is caught just drifting out of reach. Of "my brother" fallen into a "vagrant life": "let your family take you back to your original mind."

2009

"While You Wait for the Others" Grizzly Bear
The year 2009 was probably the gayest music year ever. By that, I (mostly) mean that purely musical values—the kind that make you think of the kid in choir getting picked on for not being macho enough—are back in. "Chamber pop" made more sense applied to the Fleet Foxes than to other bands I've since seen it applied to, but if people are starting to hear *Pet Sounds* in every dark corner, and are happy about that, I have to pinch myself and reflect that I never thought I'd see the day. Having a leadoff track that fairly represents the times, is popular, is art-rock, and delivers a good tune is an uncommon luxury. If it weren't for Jeffrey Norman attesting to it, I wouldn't quite copy Grizzly Bear's reputation for just being so intimidatingly good that no questions need be asked; until the harmonies kick in, this is, in terms of mechanics, just mildly dissonant, shuffle guitar strumming no Sub Pop band has ever gotten wrong, and not many albums get harmonies wrong since ProTools. Maybe their greatest hook is that video where they have the shiny cheeks and their faces change in slow motion, although I think that's for a different song.

"Debris" Reigning Sound
The only aspect of *Get Happy!!* I didn't end up liking was Elvis fils's Memphis soul mode where he was going for sheer power, like on "High Fidelity"; he just plain overshot the vocal energy level. "Debris" makes just about the same attempt and gets it right with the unlikely ingredient of a little Tom Waits in the vocal delivery.

"I Used to Say Your Name" Allyson Seconds
Anton Barbeau has pulled off an inspired Nico-ing of singer Allyson Seconds. The sound is a lovely bed of Wurlitzer and discreet echo, and, as with Robyn Hitchcock, the lyrics leverage his traditional specialization in psychedelic eccentricity in commanding sufficient workspace to drop ruminations as variously obtrusive as "I used to say your name as though it were my own" and "Even destiny depends upon the touch of God's hand."

"Mountain Man" Crash Kings
Every now and then I go for a big hit in a style that's unusually wrong for my age group or my college rock past, and as those go, this is one satisfying piece of hard rock crunch for people who wouldn't mind Linkin Park that much. The way they play the chorus soft and then right away repeat it loud has me appalled that I never thought of doing that.

"Swim" Surfer Blood
Surfer Blood have enough of that Williamsburg sound to be decidedly

late aughts, but with interesting anthem rock and technophile Brit overtones. “Quit hanging over me/Look at the hair on the back of my neck” reminds me of something Wire would write; there could definitely be something going on here.

“Satellite Mind” Metric
Only the second track by Metric I’ve ever heard puts them at two for two, and sketches their job description in my mind as: foremost practitioners of 1994–95 major label post-grunge, continuing to live the excitement of Liz Phair’s discovery of *Achtung Baby* production and Radiohead’s discovery of vocal distortion.

“Whatcha Say” Jason Derülo
I hadn’t poached material from the iTunes songs of the year collections yet, but in 2009 I was so profoundly ignorant of anything that sold a lot of copies, uh, I mean licenses, that I was desperate. Billion-seller hip-hop soul like this hasn’t really changed much in twenty years except of course for the all-pitch-corrector all-the-time vocal sound that you’d think a generation serious about *American Idol* would disapprove of. The actual note selection and ostensibly ensemble singing (chamber hop?) are darn good, and particularly clever when the girl answers the lying sweet talk with “Whatcha say?/ That you only meant well?/Well of course you did.”

“My Friend the Sun” Peter Holsapple and Chris Stamey
I was mulling over what objective criteria I’d offer to justify including this rather straight cover of a thirty-year-old song by the group Family, and here’s what I came up with: this sounds better.

“Battleships” Tris McCall
“I don’t want to duke it out with the lightweight clowns you keep around” sounded political, but “You should really learn how to kiss if you persist in acting like this” is romantic. I like this song for the piano intro, verse groove, and chorus fuzz-out, but with Tris, you feel left out if you don’t keep that social context stuff straight. So now I’m imagining it’s one of those songs that discusses political issues as if they were a romantic relationship. I hope so; it would be a shame to squander “We’re playing battleships, and I’m not cheating/But I can read your lips.”

“My Mirror Speaks” Death Cab for Cutie
It would be a shame to finish the decade with no Death Cab for Cutie, and they come through with my favorite song of theirs. I love the “Jet Fighter” drum beat, and there’s an innovation in the vocal department I want to call a touch of Frankie Laine.

“The Hazards of Love 1 (The Prettiest Whistles Won’t Wrestle the Thistles Undone)” The Decemberists

It would be a shame to finish the decade with no Decemberists, and they come through with my favorite song of Jethro Tull's. Wait, I mean favorite song of theirs! Okay, no, of course they don't go so far toward humoring my senility as actually plagiarizing Jethro Tull, but they do appropriate that kind of costume drama rock the Brits forgot to keep dominating.

"Bad Blood" Don McGlashan

"It was a warm day in December" is only remarkable if you don't live in New Zealand like he does, so I presume he's messing with us. His specialty sensitivity is capturing the feeling that things are both well and slightly off, outwardly stable but with an implacable sea change underway. "Everyone was on their way/And thinking they're already there" contains a little paradox in the Maalox.

"1901" Phoenix

There are only about five categorizable pop singing flourishes, and Thomas Mars invents a new one: the trailing yelp. The leading yelp is always weird, even when it's done by a hypothetically ideal practitioner, let's call him Kevin Rowland; this is a clever alternative that also suggests overcharged batteries, only less annoyingly unless you pay close attention, as I've probably forced you to do. I like the fat synth, funny rhythms, and "hey hey hey hey hey" of this enormous buzz-band hit, and I've been rooting for Parisian pop since I knew there was such a possibility as the Next Serge Gainsbourg.

"Oh No" Andrew Bird

One thing I noticed about *Noble Beast,* the first whole album by Andrew Bird I've listened to, is that you have to keep telling yourself not to be nervous around someone who whistles that much. He is deliberately adding character to an album, we remind ourselves, not drowning out the voices in his head before the shooting starts. "Arm in arm we are the harmless sociopaths" is a great lyric, confirming that in fact we are dealing with misfits' inhumanity to misfits, in the middle of the kind of lyric set that comes from a career poet who long ago gave up on the difference between people not getting it and not liking it. Even without such breakthrough moments of generous clarity, the world is plenty big enough for the '00s glut of ponderous light rock artists when they're this good.

"I'll Have to Dance with Cassie" God Help the Girl

Stuart Murdoch is the guy who got to the secondhand store in the morning ahead of you and cleared it of precisely the seven incredible bargains. He has a genius for exploiting entertainment skills that have been lying dormant for a while. He continues to flex quite a bit of compositional muscle, spinning an uninterruptedly clever story about a girls' disco night out ("Take an interest in me/Why must I beg for a drink?"). Motifwise, the touchstone is Ray Davies's "Come Dancing," but upping the ante of Davies's naturalistic accuracy and twentieth-

century-spanning palette considerably, to achieve a bouncily irresistible result. Apparently the artist credit designates a sustained narrative side project, and the singer here is one Catherine Ireton.

"2020" The Orange Peels
One of the most delectable power pop melodies in years comes from a group I've—obviously—never paid the right amount of attention to before. It doesn't hurt that they've spent their time doing the work it takes to sound like a million bucks: crack production, dynamite lead vocals with a kicker payload of wicked vibrato; the whole album is gloriously well-crafted. There's a mysterious golden-mean quality to the way "2020"'s 6/8 verse works so well. It's almost an A-B-A-A pattern, which is to say, almost anticlimactic on paper, that turns out to be a fist-pumper in real life.

"I'm Throwing My Arms Around Paris" Morrissey
You would think that the prospect of Morrissey moaning about how he's throwing his arms around Paris because nobody wants his love would be hard to take in 2009. Can theories of his artistic growth easily withstand a sudden threat to his faculty for varying and shading the self-pity? But this unapologetic frankness couldn't be any more welcome; it's the master getting back to business. He's on his firmest musical ground, too—the production has been in the pocket since *You Are the Quarry,* and he easily negotiates a vocal that alternates "What's Going Ahn" delicacy with "What's New Pussycat?" acrobatics. A recording like this should be Bowie's textbook for brushing up on executing the basics.

"Bluish" Animal Collective
I bought *Merriweather Post Pavilion* on iTunes after I read that *Mojo* magazine picked it as the best album of 2009, then learned via the web that so did every other music publication in the universe. I've never had the experience of being potentially swayed by quite that much community endorsement, and I guess I don't have any evidence that it didn't affect me, because I think it's a great album. Their last release, I think in 2007, was a more modest critical hit and sounded a lot more in the techno jam style, which is to say, nothing I found myself sitting through happily. I can't resist imagining that if a techno band makes enough techno records and then suddenly surprises their fans by making a non-techno record, such a listening experience will be so mysterious and wonderful to them that they will think gods have visited Earth. I suppose I can't realistically suggest that's what's happening here; shame. For one thing, as you will now have read, I put that song "Ponytail" from the Panda Bear album on my 2007 collection, so it's not a complete surprise to any of us that structured musical composition was part of their world. But here it's pretty much all really good, nimble, effortless, economical musical composition all the time, and the digital technology goes into getting the musical timbres. The percussion function is so well diffused into the melodic instrumentation that it becomes irrelevant whether we're listening to drum machine or not—no mean feat. The low end is not very

conventionally well-managed, which is probably a good thing in that you process it as a novel listening experience; you're keeping up with the inventive meters, not judging whether it grooves. The Promethean experimentation with synthetic sound sources and processing reminds me a little of Prince circa *Purple Rain,* but with a quarter-century's artifice resulting in something organic and unrecognizable as digital if you don't force your attention. You put enough bad reverb and bad distortion on a bad synthesizer track and you start to get a good harmonica track. They know this and work the system with a new standard of mastery.

"Cannibal Resource" Dirty Projectors

The appeal of Animal Collective is something communal, utilitarian, and populist; the appeal of Dirty Projectors' *Bitte Orca* is much more a matter of cold accomplishment. Thank God. Although there seems to be some South and West African influence as a guiding principle, for me the point of familiarity is Yes at the top of their game in about 1971. There was that moment in a Yes song where Yes's three plot developers needed a break between stream-of-consciousness concerti, and Chris Squire and Bill Bruford set to twenty measures of employing sheer drum and bass rocketkraft, bending some higher math polyrhythm to their übermenschen will. Dirty Projectors are that good. Well, I knew nothing about them before 2009 (thanks, Gil Ray, for the tip), but they somehow got that good for this album. Staying on one chord for a whole song is usually as tedious as you'd think, but here that's raised to a high art of shading the key without overt alteration. Leaving "space" in the mix is, a sad majority of the time, a doomed little reinvention of the bad 1987 worldbeat demo for a thousand mistargeted listener profiles; why is this the exception? Besides those dead stunning female vocals, the reason is: good old brain horsepower and cockiness. That's what that enterprise needs, not nonsense about avoiding thinking too much and learning to feel it. That fantastic guitar chug that drags belligerently behind the beat—the average doofus project leader would nix that as not feeling it. Please, killer whale, stave such puny craft! Yes, Nietzsche was first and foremost a harmful sociopath, but the Projectors channel the old gay scientist's defiant vision and make merciless newness fun again.

2010

"Dark Fantasy" [edit] Kanye West

Two thousand ten catches me with my feelings a little hurt. As W.S. Merwin observed brilliantly in a poem, "Tell me what you see vanishing and I/Will tell you who you are"; at one of my unfortunate moments of paying attention to "iTunes Essentials," the vanishometer noticed that 2010 was the first year that could plausibly be said to contain no rock music. Now, when the very last guitarist forgets the chords to "Smoke on the Water," will I actually weep? I don't think quite. What I will miss is that rock and roll was that good a participatory ritual. You could join in rock music at whatever your level was, including air guitar, and the world will spend years searching the Internet in vain for something like it. There shall never be air laptop. The Beatles figured out to struggle against their elite genius to somehow Get Back, to somehow Let It Be, but it could not be let be, and now the history that is rock history is played out, and is shutting down. There is no logos that strives forward from *Revolver* to "Teenage Dream." God is dead. We are back in the land of Pharaoh. And, say it with me, no one man should have all that power. *My Dark Twisted Fantasy* is spiked enough with dazzle, but I don't love it as much as everyone else; to me when you turn the pugnacious thing and the art-rock thing this far up, what you get is basically today's Billy Joel album. And just like then, it's not still rock and roll to me. Though I don't love it, I like it quite a bit; the chorus has some whizz-bang sonics – check my 1980 pal Mike Oldfield – and I chuckle every time at "How you say broke in Spanish? Me no hablo." I'm editing out the English accent spoken intro, which it embarrasses me slightly to play to anyone. It's really Kanye's videos for this album that most warrant my hard-earned click. The part with the bird woman being terrified when bird is served is an invigorating shocker, and I think Billy Joel would feel good about raising a toast to the douchebags.

"Drunk Girls" LCD Soundsystem

I've been very close to including one LCD Soundsystem track or another for some time, but I always end up thinking no, what I'm listening to is essentially a novelty number I can imagine someone else liking, with not nearly enough going on musically. Worse, they don't wear well with me. I came the closest to including "North American Scum," but then stopped being able to fathom what I was thinking, except that I have a bad feeling that if I hear five of your songs, and they're all grotesquely overlong, and then I hear one that's a sensible length, I have some tragic compulsion to reward that one. But I've listened to "Drunk Girls" many times, and I'm ready to say what the hell, I'm way over whatever my beef was when rock wasn't dead, and I will absolutely take this. It would sure be weird if I was slow to notice that James Murphy and Kid Cudi were actually the people carrying the torch for pop rock.

"Bright Lit Blue Skies" Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti

I don't remember saying anything negative about the catchiness of any song, but Ariel Pink's acclaimed "Round and Round" reminds me to add that to get full credit, a catchy musical phrase also has to not be horrible. As Mr. Gru says, "Kidding! Although, it is true." But the Pink don't usually have that problem, and I feel safe in saying I like every song on the album except that one, and am happy about the world loving them for stupid reasons, as so often happens. "Bright Lit Blue Skies" is the strongest evidence of their being the weird reincarnation of some sixties-style obsessives with accidental commercial appeal, like maybe the Grass Roots, and of course I mean the Creed Bratton line-up.

"Fula Fula" Konono No. 1

One of the two most important musical experiences since I last wrote here (for 2009) was my first listening party. I didn't know any of the attendees that well, and I didn't know what to expect, but it was a rich social encounter that left a deep impression. The host had some beautiful reference-tuned speakers, and the vinyl and digital material we brought all sounded its Sunday best. I came away a convert to several items in the program, including this, which I took to be a fairly obscure Congo artist showcasing creatively amplified thumb-piano. Later I played it for Bradley Skaught, who said, "Oh, that must be Konono No. 1." Yeah, okay, so apparently Björk knows about them, etc. etc. Screw you all. Oh, my other most important musical experience was when Bradley's band the Bye Bye Blackbirds played an acoustic set in my living room. There is simply nothing, not even reference-tuned speakers, like three people playing great acoustic guitar and singing great harmony in non-cyber space.

"Dynamite" Taio Cruz

Twenty-ten was a very good year for engaging lyrics if you looked around, and in some ways none captured my attention more than those of "Dynamite." I hope it doesn't come across wrong when I say that I'm only a little less taken aback by a grown adult singing, "I'm wearing all my favorite brands" than if he were singing about getting his first cell phone. I know, teen marketing and all, but my point is there's something so unfiltered about that line that I just have to like it; I do *almost* know what it's like to feel good because I'm wearing a brand of clothing I like, and if I did, why wouldn't I want to celebrate and live my life and throw my hands in the air? My five-year-old adores this age-of-Antares anthem even more than I do, which is definitely some; I can only imagine how resonant this will be with her when she is old enough to feel brand loyalty.

"Watercolor Day" Seth Swirsky

As all-powerful as the Internet is, I find it a little hard to point to substantive changes in how music sounds that are direct results. It may be that some alarming percentage of what you hear is actually made on Garage Band, but the goal there is not to be able to tell; no one aspires to that Garage Band sound. Certainly the Internet has

changed how people *find out about* music, and one novelty there for my methods is what I'll call canon triangulation. Searching around for the best new songs, I'll do a web search on several songs that I consider indicators of good ears, and see what else is on those people's list, and so on. I found "Watercolor Day" that way, I think on a site I want to credit with being associated with Audities, though I see I'm not able to repeat the search today. And what a relief that is! Proper following of music has to have a certain amount of fuzzy information or it's too much of an affront to accountability to talk about a song that is merely good. That Savoy Truffle bari sax tag at the end of "It's another watercolor day" is nothing you can blog about, it's just unquestionably satisfying to listen to. Unrelated to my mushy reasons for wanting to refer to his song, Seth Swirsky's long career is, on the other hand, non-stop stuff to talk about, including actually having a song of his recorded by Al Green, and how this career led up to such dexterity with Beatles moves is a mystery I probably have to delve into further.

"Me Being Maximum" Agony Aunts

Genuinely Cole-Porter-clever pop rock lyrics are not common; insufficient success hinges on them, especially with the universe of musical intellectual property in the current state of disarray. This is not a bad specimen for any period, and a fine unexpected addition to my collection of braggadocio art. Once "Me being maximum, you being minimum, we'll be so medium" lodges in your head, it's worse than "hey-yo, gotta let go."

"The Suburbs" Arcade Fire

"So can you understand why I want a daughter while I'm still young?/I want to hold her hand and show her some beauty before this damage is done": the first half of that is some extremely respectable writing (the second half is an important thing to say, but anyone could have written it). I'm not used to listening to Arcade Fire and not wondering what the fuss is, but even beyond the words, this is musically adept, catchy, and very well sung, working that extra Ian McCulloch yawn at the end of words. I still don't get any sort of big lightbulb with the earlier stuff, but go ahead and gloat, long-time fans.

"Too Much" [edit] Sufjan Stevens

I'm guessing that Animal Collective have encouraged some artists with an urge to orchestrate to try doing it with layers of synthesized mess. You sequence, layer, and process the mess and, voila, sometimes not mess. *The Age of Adz*, its ostensible obsession being mentally disturbed artist Royal Robertson, certainly manages to transcend any mere pop influence into becoming its own arguably breathtaking Gaudi cathedral made mostly from unpleasant little sounds; nevertheless, whereas Sufjan enjoys lavish native gifts as an empathic balladeer, he needs a little help from his friends as a symphonic conceptualist. And so, "Too Much" manages a fantastic 7/4 electrocalypso geniuscape

before going on too long, kind of like that exotic dream that turns into just having to find a bathroom.

"Helicopter" Deerhunter
Sounding like it could easily be the next song on *The Age of Adz* after freshening up, "Helicopter" reminds me that there are artists out there I haven't paid enough attention to, like Bradford Cox/Atlas Sound/Deerhunter, and this entrancing slow-motion demise of a lost soul with "helicopters circling the scene" indicates there's much to be missing out on.

"Running Out" Scissor Sisters
You can hear the production budget step up here, can't you? This song is the mojo of 1981 perfected, and that's a bargeload of perfecting, no minor touch-up. Pete Shelley, the Pretenders, and our old friend the Bowie who started making best albums since *Scary Monsters* are all standing and cheering, the way I picture it.

"Floating Vibes" Surfer Blood
Jesus? "Forget the second coming, I need you in the here and now/Instead of dreaming up a way to spread your name across the world somehow" is the opening sentiment, which then modulates to resentment at someone leaving, and then to an admonition that the ocean swallowed him fully, and "you'd better learn how to surf." This is such a stealthily fine little tune with such a stealthily auspicious lyric set that I'm going to let them get away with rather slushy meaning a second time.

"Licenses to Hide" The Posies
Here's one where I insist that you savor what a good *mix* this is. As my wife Kristine would make fun of me for noticing, it sounds like they were using a great vocal mike, and that's often actually a result of how the mixing engineer made it sit. Kristine then calls appropriate attention to the fact that the Posies have ventured into three part harmony, as well as adding a female guest vocalist, all of which sound great, and sound like they were recorded using great microphones. As for the song, the chorus here functions less as a compositional climax than as cinematography, its cabaret overtones a centurywide backdrop against which the verse pops with its treatment of honesty in second act romance.

"You Must Be Out of Your Mind" The Magnetic Fields
The Fields surge once again to music-box-with-twirling-Oscar-Wilde perfection, particularly with the unsurpassable double rhyme of "I want you crawling back to me/On bended knees, yeah/Like an appendectomy/Sans anesthesia." It's a double rhyme. It's a double rhyme. Oh my God. It's so bright. Oh, sorry, the Internet is influencing me again.

"Crash Years" The New Pornographers
The New Pornographers are the most dependable artists of the last ten years, but as it happens, I first heard this in a Barnes and Noble without knowing who it was. I couldn't get over how odd it was that the song stood out as something I was positive I would like a lot, and I had no idea why, and to this day I wonder. Was it mostly that bass and string groove? I can't think I had time to absorb something to hum, and there's no real stylistic rallying point to it. In Taio Cruz terms, it was like I was throwing my hands up in the air without knowing I was wearing my favorite brands.

"Angry World" Neil Young
Neil Young, who was losing his marbles and putting out inscrutable electronic music when Sufjan Stevens was in diapers, is back to show the youngsters how it's done. Together with the mini grunge revival of its ultracompressed drop-D guitar, "Angry World" is a reminder that Neil's is one of the broadest of musical palettes, and it's one ultra-cool canvas, spilling over with unexpected sonic flavor and innuendo.

"Baby Lee" Teenage Fanclub
When I get to the top songs of a year, I rein in my tendencies to simply express how incredibly great I think a song is, but there's an especially strong temptation here. How could that chorus melody have possibly not existed until now? As should be expected from a group who wrote the line "Here is a sunrise/Ain't that enough," Teenage Fanclub have remarkable instincts for not dressing a song up too much, which can make them come off plain. It's downright odd playing "Baby Lee" for someone and expecting them to get excited, kind of like playing them "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Even the usual electric pop combo chime and harmony are laid aside in favor of what I have to think is deliberate quaintness: "Baby Lee, I am always watching from a distance/Marry, marry me, oh baby, now I am insistin'." Hold on, that's half-baked, isn't it? I couldn't leave a line like that. I'd have to find scansion that didn't repeat "marry," for one thing. Come to think of it, "marry me" would probably have to go, as an offense to my success-free youth market impulses. But what the occasion calls for is for someone to say, it's obviously already perfect, you can't change it, at all. It is incredibly great.

"On a Good Day" Joanna Newsom
It's easy to imagine this song being long remembered, and, if so, there will be plenty of future surprise at its context, standing out as it does like a tiny Irish Thomas Moore song in the middle of *Have One on Me*, an album built to house nine-minute art rock. I often like art rock, and it's first-rate art rock; she has something to say at all times, often in abstraction and even Kate-Bush-like parables, and its folk (she plays harp) and jazzy, modernist arrangements impress with a slight astringency at every moment. By track seven, your guard is down for "On a Good Day," which aims right for the heart. At 1:48, it's over in

a blink, but demands immediate revisitation, especially verse two: “I saw a life and I called it mine/I saw it drawn so sweet and fine/And I had begun to fill in all the lines/ Right down to what we’d name her.” I’m emotional just typing that; what a way with words! I can’t help but think of a miscarriage, but it’s framed as either a central event of a lost love relationship, or maybe even speculative, or maybe even metaphorical. In this, too, I can imagine she’s learned from Kate Bush, who can engage on a couple of levels of interpretation. I ran across Fleet Foxes’ Robin Pecknold playing a version of “On a Good Day” on YouTube; it was wonderful to hear this composition’s clarity of humanity seconded by another remarkable soul who wants to hold our hand and show us some beauty.

2011

"What Makes You Beautiful" One Direction
This is the second year I've added updates to this book, and I think there's a lesson to be learned from *The Timetables of History*, an ambitious comparison of simultaneous events in politics, science, the arts, etc. from 5000 B.C. to its year of publication, 1946. It was updated in subsequent editions. I've learned a lot of historical perspective from that book, and a little editorial perspective. What a person can learn from the 1977 update, for instance, is that the important musical events were a number of prominent deaths such as those of conductors, a couple of national anthem adoptions, and Rudolf Barshai's emigration to Israel. What my own readers can learn is that I'm no more likely to cover important Deadmau5 releases than *Timetables* was to cover *Never Mind the Bollocks*, although it does mention Elvis's death, which is to *Timetables of History* as my including "What Makes You Beautiful" is to this book: the author couldn't miss it, even by trying. I should be clear that I do like "What Makes You Beautiful"—that hook, "Everyone else in the room can see it" is very good—but I'm also listening for aesthetics across generations. The group Simon Cowell would have assembled in 1966, the Monkees, whom I love (R.I.P. Davy), worked very nearly within the same aesthetic. By contrast, going back another 45 years and comparing either Monkees or One Direction recordings to, say, Rudy Vallee's is almost unimaginable. You run all that math and it's interesting to wonder whether preteens of 2056 will be listening to producer-friendly EDM just because that's where it's all going, or whether the surprising message of One Direction is that rock music isn't all that dead. Oh, I did take a little time to catch up on Deadmau5 songs I hadn't heard, which is all of them, and I found one called "Ghosts N Stuff" that probably would have made my 2008 list.

"The Holograms" Fol Chen
One nice development of the twentyteens is Asthmatic Kitty Records, which I used to know only as the confusing logo at the bottom of Sufjan Stevens albums: isn't he on a real label or something? AK is not only real, but home to a remarkable range of talent, producing adventurous material from the elaborate high concepts of Helsinki's Pepe Deluxé to the bold, arty, near-electronic pop of Fol Chen. There are only a couple of lines in the song, repeated á la Laurie Anderson, but one is, "I'm so sorry, I've forgotten your name." I know Laurie would approve. Insider sonics award: the sample piano with the decay hideously clipped by the noise gate, left in the mix at proud solo volume.

"Transamerica Pyramid" The Corner Laughers
The Corner Laughers are another exponent of the increasingly noteworthy pool of SF Bay Area musicians that also manifests as the Agony Aunts, the most recognizable common feature being

increasingly noteworthy lead singer Karla Kane, although the grin-prolonging cleverness of the lyrics is as important an aspect of the branding. The vibe reminds me of Stuart Murdoch with Catherine Ireton in God Help the Girl, with the same gift for tying up a tight rhyme scheme with apparent effortlessness in the casual details: "All the Barracudas…going down Judah/With the slant-sixes purring like the dance mixes." This was their March 2011 "single of the month," and I believe I'm ready to sign up.

"Songcycle 2011 [section 6]" Todd Dillingham

Todd Dillingham's musical world gives the initial impression of being so deep in reclusive folk-psychedelia that there's just no chance of it making sense amidst a punchy best-of-year collection, least of all a year that's pretty far from 1972. The guest star here, for instance, is Pete McCabe, whose "The Man Who Ate the Plant," the crown jewel of Bill Szymczyk's utterly offbeat Tumbleweed Records (oh to find a copy of "Colorado" by Danny Holien), must have sold in the single digits. The wonder of this isn't that it's so good, but that it's so pro, with arrangement depth that commands a devotion of the ears on its own terms, the comparison that continually springs to mind being to *Rock Bottom* by Robert Wyatt. Apparently another secret weapon here is the "orchestrations" of fellow gifted eccentric Wim Oudijk.

"No Church in the Wild" Kanye West & Jay-Z

Voltaire said, "Judge a man by his question rather than his answers," and Kanye is a powerful enough lyricist to knock you out with these three quick punches: "What's a mob to a king?/What's a king to a god?/What's god to a non-believer?" That's respectable anthropological deconstruction, and Jay-Z keeps pace heavinesswise with "Tears on the mausoleum floor/Blood stains the coliseum doors." And Plato. And Socrates. And Jesus. It all makes me slightly disappointed that I don't really feel like working out what their answers to these questions are, not so much because they don't cohere, which to some extent they don't, but because I'm afraid of them cohering as more rejection of the morality of the weak in favor of something merely more self-serving, better tuned to having impressionable kids idolize these guys because they can imagine shooting their own mouths off and lording their own advantages over someone. Still, in pop lyrics, effrontery is good enough if you do it just right, just as on the musical end, sounding like *The Wall* is good enough if you do it just right.

"I'll Be Waiting" Adele

If there are people who are only so enraptured by Adele but are pretty big fans of *Dusty in Memphis*, I wouldn't want them to miss "I'll Be Waiting." It must be said that Adele is probably the vocalist of the year unless it's Merrill Garbus of Tune-Yards, and I'll admit I was doing that thought experiment at a time when I assumed Merrill was a black male. I'm realizing that Adele has an unusually listenable vocal style for a giant star. The rule, especially for women, seems to be that if you don't overdo, you don't get noticed. There's a little bit of Billie

Holiday when the vibrato shatters into the rasp, which reminds me that a song where a woman hopes a man will take her back because now she's changed has been a long time coming.

"Hour of the Idiot" Meat Puppets
I don't quite want to say that with the Lydian, too-many-fourths vocals, the Meat Puppets sound like they've suddenly been influenced by Alice in Chains, but maybe they've accidentally made me appreciate how for them, deciding to suddenly be influenced by Alice in Chains would almost be brilliant. I'll instead say this dense, fussy, synthesizer-emulsified production is so crazy and wrong it might have made me pay attention to Alice in Chains.

"Go Right Ahead" Sondre Lerche
My wife Kristine introduced me to the wordsmithy—and slightly Smithy—Norwegian Sondre Lerche, and I thought of him as a pretty obscure find, even a little on the difficult side with his wash of sevenths, sixths, augmented this, and diminished that. But that was a couple of Letterman appearances ago, and he's a little less difficult nowadays, if a lot less obscure. Not to take a thing away from the records, but it's hard not to do a double take at the unexpected fullness and precision of both his live vocals and his live guitar, so don't miss those.

"Born Alone" Wilco
This is a curious set of lyrics. It gives the impression of being non-sequiturs used to fill out what might have been their best melody ever and then just left there for the heck of it rather than teased into making sense. What's left in the apparent inchoate state seems to shake out as a meditation on ultimate concerns. It doesn't sound like it's striving toward religion but lo and behold, there are "gospel" and "divine" and "mine eyes" a couple of times, where originally what mine eyes have seen was the coming of the Lord. Besides the title line, "I was born to die alone," I like the phrase, "Subtract the silence of myself"; I wouldn't go so far as to say they clarify the point, but maybe it's kind of like: how do you become alone when you die if you're subtracting the experience of aloneness?

"Modesto Waltz" Rachel Taylor Brown
We want death contemplation! We want death contemplation! In this song, Rachel Taylor Brown, who sounds great on the second of the two records of hers I've heard, is listening to carrion birds circling and trying to talk her into dying: "It's easy to go/To lay down the host/Drop the body/Keep the ghost." This is a bluesy waltz-time piano number with high gloss backing vocals, all vaguely recalling the Delta Rhythm Boys doing "Dry Bones" in some way I wouldn't attempt to justify. Her response: "It's a blue green glorious day/I thought I had many things to say/But maybe I don't."

“Machu Picchu” The Strokes
My big bright idea to discover good 2011 songs was going to be Pandora. Kristine and I hear a lot of good music at our favorite sushi restaurant and we found out it wasn't radio or subscription content, it was Pandora. But my own attempt was laughably unsuccessful; I'm trying to recall the exact words of the very last recommendation explanation before I gave up, but it was very close to, "Here is another soft rock song with a lot of repeated words." What sorcery is this that can read my very soul? I still like Pandora (sushi), but I have to credit my wife's use of Spotify for turning this up—maybe she just has better taste so she gets better correlations for the suggestions. The Strokes are one of those artists I lose track of just because who can keep up with everyone, but they can sure always surprise you with a gem. I love the development on this one. There's the million-dollar guitar riff —you'll know the one—but it doesn't seem that gripping the first time it happens, it just sails across the very nice dubby verse. But this song is "looking for a mountain [it] can climb," and the production works powerful magic when it reappears, and the whole ends up being quite an exciting ride.

"Kill the Killjoy" The Disciplines
The jangle on the opening guitar chord is worth appreciation all by itself, with a universe of mysterious overtones you barely hear, not unlike the first chord of “A Hard Day’s Night.” The big sound, positive message, and second-to-none melodic instincts make this my 2011 party anthem, for when I’m Detroit-leaning down 101 in my Prius and just need to get things sick!

“Jesus Fever” Kurt Vile
Let’s get the Jesus-reference-to-sound-spiritual-yet-ironic warning out of the way, and get right to that delicious acoustic guitar line. Civilization depends on folks like Kurt coming up with one of these every so often; it would be worthy of Johnny Marr in the emotion-tugging arpeggio and Alex Chilton in the wacko not-in-the-key notes that make an impossible resolution. The instrumentation is in fact so generally lovely you never have to worry about the lyrics anyway, and after the fairly decent first line, “I’d pack my suitcase with myself/But I’m already gone,” don’t worry too much about your attention wandering back to that mighty pretty guitar.

“Alligator Aviator Autopilot Antimatter” R.E.M.
Who is this Peaches person? I would want to keep replaying this just to hear her backing vocals, but I also want to keep replaying it as a beautiful sixties+nineties rocking way to remember the great R.E.M., who took me by surprise announcing this to be the last album from the most important band of the last three decades. Michael Stipe is at his lyrical best when he sounds like he's summoning all his power to say something confused and pointless, bringing a new point into the world, the point of view of the person no one listens to. Thank you, Michael. This alligator was not a hater.

“A Slanted Tone” F*ed Up**
For old time's sake, Dan Vallor hipped me to another winner, a surprisingly layered, precise, and emotionally nuanced ensemble by any standard, certainly by the standard of bands that do cookie monster vocals and nonstop hardcore punk fuzz guitar, which F***ed Up does. But, f*** me, they are f***ing awesome. The words are carefully crafted, not just an explosion of intense feelings: "He raised a trumpet to his mouth; the sound of every voice tumbled out. When he stretched the canvas into his frame he painted everyone with the same brush." What does it f***ing mean? The album is a f***ing rock opera and I think this might possibly be the main character's assessment of an unreliable narrator, maybe as an artistic means of exploring the phenomenology of a created being. Or not. F*** if I know.

“Daisy” Curtains for You
Curtains for You were the opening band of a show Kristine saw, and upon some YouTube research, we immediately latched onto this tremendously melodic song. It's a confirmed classic around our house, and should be everywhere. Matthew Gervais's resonant vocals remind me a little of Rufus Wainwright, reinforced by the occasional Cole Porterish turns of the chord progression, and the literacy you might expect from that description is not missing: "Our whole life's condensed into short sentences/Just two daisies trying to fit in/In this rose garden." If you'd told me that was a lost line from T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," I probably would have believed it.

“Paradise Is Not So Bad” Lifeguards
The reunion of the Tobin Sprout Guided By Voices is exciting for sure, but I must divert attention to the other 2011 Robert Pollard album (what, two albums in one year from Robert Pollard?), which is a collaboration with the most excellent Doug Gillard, from the Cobra Verde GBV lineup. It’s not like there are hundreds of heavy guitar riffs vying for the crown in 2011, but this would have been the winner even in some years with a Led Zeppelin album, and that’s not even the best part, which is the verse B part that goes, “Stuck in the middle of the guest list free for all debutante ball/John, are you ready? No, I am ready to go home.” I love this little lyric detail: one personage in what I take to be a chaotic concert setting is “the flashlight on your feet guy.”

“Gangsta” Tune-Yards
The Village Voice “Pazz and Jop” critics’ poll is probably the most authoritative conferrer of hipster standing, and Pazz and Jop winner Tune-Yards is the act of the year to upset people who make a living seeing through hipster phenomena. But there’s just no toehold there; the stuff is too good on every level. At the very least, the *whokill* album opener “Bizness” does the best Bobby McFerrin ever, inclusive of Bobby McFerrin, and is a swell song, too. “Gangsta” is probably the

best purely musical achievement in the 2011 song set if you don't count pop accessibility, and it's actually plenty accessible—if you can't take this, you'll probably want to regift the book you're reading. I always find myself rooting for jazz, saxophone, and right-size freakout passages to make a comeback, and we are on message in all those departments, including the right-size.

"The Valley" Okkervil River

Critics are talking more about the way abstract lyrics make them feel, and I like that, and I do it, but sometimes it makes me think people don't understand how high the bar has been set. It's a little weird being so reverent about Will Sheff, because he's kind of an overemoting doofus in a lot of the places on YouTube you're going to land when you search for him, but he is the lyricist setting the bar. The money I'll put where my mouth is would be "On Tour with Zykos," which is sensational from start to finish, but if you don't find "God knows I just want to/Make this white lie big enough to climb inside with you" sensational, again, maybe regift. You have to appreciate his facility with quietly shared emotions to appreciate how radical the 2011 album *I Am Very Far* is. It's the best and most genuinely disturbing album lyric set I've heard in some time, and much of the music is so arch I don't like it, but before you've simply had too much pounded out of you, the first song is pure welcome martial arts. All on a single chord, almost a literal military march, it details with utter brutality the slit throats, skinned corpses, and last roads out of cities for us who are "fallen in the valley of the rock and roll dead." The bizarre outcome is that you will actually find yourself joyously chanting, "We are fallen in the valley of the rock and roll dead," by the way, as well as relishing the sheer size of the drums, organ, and Norman Whitfield-mode unison strings on this monster. And go read the rest of the album's lyrics, which are amazing, while I continue to try to get used to the music.

"Romance" Wild Flag

My number ones aren't always grand finales, are they? A lot of times they're sensitive or innovative, but that's different. Wild Flag's "Romance" is a little sensitive and a little innovative, but it's mostly grand finale. It starts off somewhat deceptively as a sequenced synthesizer line and builds a melody-line vocabulary using mostly the history of girl groups as raw material. (The members have been in A-list groups themselves, though if you're like me the flipout is that singer Carrie Brownstein is the girl in *Portlandia*.) It's certainly not their only trick; another excellent song from the album, "Endless Talk," evokes a different, more new-wave and slightly more male pop history tracing through the Cars back to Buddy Holly, and sometimes they don't seem to be caring about history at all. But when they do, they're frighteningly good at it. "Hey hey, can you feel it?" is the first appearance of the main motif: the Go-Go's. It's nice enough that anyone would write an unflinching Go-Go's song, but when that chorus revs, you realize they have bigger plans. Yes, you just have to hear it, but, really, you almost don't; the momentum is implicit in the sheer layout of the words: "Hands down we like, we like what we like/

Hands down we like, we love, we choose you." Just the horsepower and propulsion of that is overwhelming. Hands down. We're sure. We repeat it. We agree. “Like” turns to “love” turns to making a choice, a commitment that it's you. All the lines go by fast, like this brightest of the flashes: "We dance to free ourselves from the room." Verse 2 starts, "Back when I had no story, nothing to form me/You got under my skin." Perfect—that's what romance (the title) is: a story. You make me exist romantically by putting me in a story, and the music is the story, and "Sound is the blood between me and you." I think it is, too.

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About the Author

Scott Miller has released more than a dozen albums with his bands Game Theory and the Loud Family. His music has been described as "a cross between Alex Chilton, James Joyce, and the Electric Prunes" (Stereo Review) and "smart, funny, and instantly memorable" (Rolling Stone).

Learn more about Scott's work at http://www.loudfamily.com. Buy Scott's music at http://www.125records.com.